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"Now I get it!"

Report on the **National Youth Literacy Demonstration Project**

A comprehensive approach to building literacy skills, academic knowledge, and the behaviours required to succeed in school and in life

Literacy BC, 2006

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A significant number of children leave elementary school without the literacy skills required to succeed in higher grades.

Unable to keep up, many of these students tune out, act out, and ultimately drop out.

Figuring out how to keep these kids in school and how to help them build the skills needed to succeed is an ongoing challenge for government, educators, and parents across Canada.

Research results from the National Youth Literacy Demonstration Project offer hope and insights into promising practices.

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Most of all, we would like to acknowledge the unflagging efforts of the staff at the New School. This talented and dedicated group of competent, caring and visionary professionals includes: Mark McCue, lead teacher for the first two critical years; Marian Malcolmson, counsellor; Kyle Langford, teacher aide; Susan Stewart and Jennifer Arntzen, art teachers; Jennifer Riske, third and fourth year lead teacher, Marv Granek, study club coordinator, and Linda London, administrative support. In addition, several others were instrumental in making the program work. Joyce Upex was the onsite researcher for the first two years. John Malcolmson helped lay the framework by writing the original literature review and then developing the database information system. Jaime Courtade provided timely technical support to keep the computer network operating. All of these individuals contributed not just their labour but also their insights and enthusiasm, all of which contributed to the success of the project..

This report was written by the principal investigators, Heide Spruck Wrigley and James Powrie. Input was provided by Lee Weinstein, Joyce Upex, Mark McCue, Marian Malcolmson, Kyle Langford, Jennifer Arntzen, and Jennifer Riske.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the students who, bucking significant odds, gave us and themselves a chance for success. In particular, we wish to thank the student who cried out, "Now, I get it!" during one of the class sessions. For us it was confirmation that, indeed, we were also getting it right.

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OVERVIEW

The National Youth Literacy Demonstration Project operated a demonstration school in Surrey, BC for three years. Results from that study provide a model of promising practices for programs serving at-risk youth who struggle with literacy.

From September 2002 through June 2004, Literacy BC and School District 36 (Surrey) operated a demonstration classroom called the New School @ Surrey. The small school targeted at-risk youth aged 15 and 16 who had significant challenges with literacy. The young people had either dropped out of school or were likely to do so because of their low attendance, behavioural issues, and failure to complete previous grades. Most of those who were still attending school did so irregularly. Few had passed a course in the previous two years.

This comprehensive program model (ongoing in Surrey, BC) combines literacy development, academic subjects, social and emotional development, art, and technology in a two-year program designed to help students upgrade a wide range of skills, reintegrate into the school system, and, as one parent put it, "become not just better students but better human beings."

Overall, the program during the study period was remarkably successful. Most of the students became active readers, stayed in school, developed essential academic and behavioural skills, and moved back into conventional or alternative high school programs. School District 36 (Surrey) has doubled the program's teaching staff and continues to fund the program with core funding.

This report describes the project's approach to learning and research, outlines results, and explains the challenges faced by researchers, practitioners and

students. Our goals were to 1) identify effective practices for educating at-risk youth with low literacy skills, 2) build a practical teaching and support model that could be effectively operated by other school districts, and 3) develop a set of approaches and teaching tools that can be used by other literacy practitioners, both inside and outside of the public school system. There was close collaboration between the research team, the practitioner team, and school administrators in addressing these goals. For the most part, reflections on and revisions of the program model occurred with the participation of all involved.

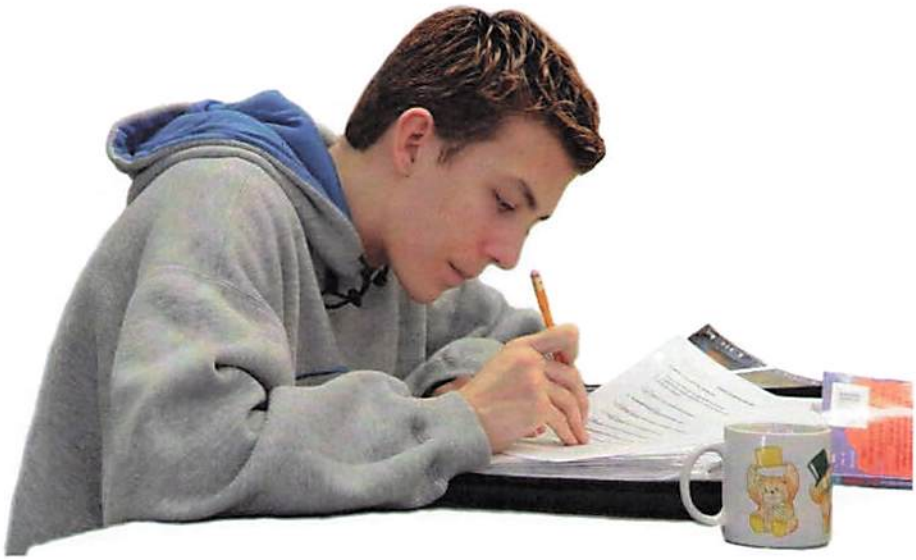
This report is intended principally for the use of practitioners and administrators seeking to understand and implement effective ways to engage young people in literacy development, promote social and emotional growth, and increase academic achievement. Part 1: *Summary and Promising Practices* provides an overview of the research project and focuses on promising practices identified by staff and researchers. Part 2: *Research and Lessons Learned* describes the research methodology, discusses findings, and presents lessons learned. For reasons of confidentiality and accessibility, this report does not include detailed individual student background information or complete text of student and parent interviews. These are summarized in this report and are available for research purposes from Literacy BC. Also available are more detailed research data, our initial literature review, practitioner guides, and curriculum materials.

We focused our efforts on developing and documenting an effective model for helping high-need students remain in school and thrive in life. While this program is one of a number of alternative programs in Canada seeking to improve learning opportunities for those who are not successful in the mainstream educational system, the New School research project is unique. It focuses on the specific challenges of adolescents who are able to learn but do not read, write or do math well and who do not have the social, emotional, or behavioural skills to function in mainstream classes. The New School intervention model, therefore, may not be directly applicable to young people who, for other reasons, have difficulty in school or who simply need to improve their reading skills[1]. The New School model is not a full answer, nor a complete solution to the many challenges related to educating all of today's youth. Nevertheless, we believe that key elements of the program design apply to nearly all other efforts that target high need students. This includes ongoing student counselling and coaching and a model of teaching that emphasizes explicit instruction and engaged learning for literacy development, academic subjects, and social and emotional development.

[1] Across North America, a number of models focused on "adolescent literacy" for students who are not necessarily designated "at risk" speak to this issue.

THE PROBLEM

School dropout rates and lack of essential skills development are an ongoing national concern.



According to the HRDC *Youth in Transition Survey*, approximately 15% of Canadian men and 9% of women do not attain a high school diploma by the time they are 20 years old. These percentages are significantly higher for certain populations and geographic areas.

The 2003 *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey* (ALL) indicates that about 58% of adults aged 16 to 65 in Canada possess skills in the top three literacy levels considered necessary to meet everyday reading requirements. About 15% of Canadians (1 in 7) scored at the lowest level one, indicating they had significant difficulty reading. The survey also showed an apparent decline in literacy scores for young people aged 16 to 25 between 1994 and 2003, particularly in families where parents had not completed grade 12.

> *"A significant minority of Canadian children are not developing the skills and ability to learn that will help them live and work to their full potential."*
>
> -- *Knowledge Matters, Skills and Learning for Canadians*, Government of Canada

The results of the ALL are especially worrisome since the economy of the 21st Century demands that Canadians have higher literacy skills. The lack of significant improvement in literacy levels over the years has resulted in both employee

and skills gaps in key occupations. Unchecked, the quality of life for many Canadians and the stature of Canada in the world economy are likely to erode.

Two options considered in addressing the skills shortages of today and the future include: 1) improving the literacy skills of Canada's youth and adults and 2) increasing immigration of literate and skilled workers from other countries. Likely, both strategies will be required, however, there are multiple benefits to providing greater assistance for today's youth, particularly those with literacy challenges. Increased numbers of literate young people will enter adulthood prepared to work and positively integrate into society. This will yield fewer individuals with unmarketable skills and often related dysfunctional social behaviour.

Based on interviews with students and a review of the literature, it is clear that a common reason for the academic and related behavioural difficulties that many adolescents encounter is that they do not learn to read by the time they complete third grade. This is where, traditionally, students are expected to shift from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." Children whose literacy skills lag significantly at that time often face an uphill challenge throughout their school and work careers.

Since students must acquire most knowledge through reading, lack of adequate literacy skills inhibits academic progress in all subjects. Once students enter the higher grades, little is offered in terms of scaffolding, hands-on learning, individualized assistance, or technology-mediated instruction — processes known to assist struggling readers. Without receiving such assistance, the undiscovered strength of many of these students — the ability to learn in ways that are not dependent on print — remains undiscovered by the student. Consequently, competence and confidence decrease, often leading to reduced self-esteem, and increased frustration. Responses tend to be of two kinds: students either disengage and shut down or become angry and act out. In either case, students perceive themselves as failures and become alienated and disengaged from the educational process.

Few resources are available for high school students who face multiple challenges. They have literacy difficulties; their social and emotional skills have developed to rationalize and direct attention away from their learning difficulties; and they often have developed behaviours that put them at risk. While special assistance is mandated for students with severe learning disabilities, support for students who struggle with reading and writing because they process information differently is often not in place. Similarly, programs targeted at students with severe behavioural issues tend to focus on behaviour modification but offer little in terms of coaching that emphasizes social and emotional growth. Finally, alternative models designed for students who want to and can learn independently do not work for students who face literacy challenges, since such models are typically self-paced and require that students learn through the use of modules that require independent reading and self-directed learning – the very skills that are lacking. Without assistance that speaks directly to their multiple needs (literacy skills, academic knowledge, social-emotional development, and behavioural change), the future for these students is far from bright.

THE STUDENTS

Challenged by a lack of literacy skills, they are unable to succeed in school: Many tune out, act out, and, ultimately, drop out.

At the beginning of the school year, the incoming students at the New School don't seem to have much in common. There is the withdrawn kid in the back of the class who says little and does less, the tough one who shows up rarely and then apparently only to intimidate, and the silly kid who can't sit still or leave others alone. The common trait they share is their inability to read well enough to keep up in regular classes. They have developed strategies to get by in a world in which they cannot excel. Most kids would rather be badged a hoodlum, cutup or weirdo rather than be branded a "dummy" or "idiot."

In interviews with the students who participated in the demonstration classroom, early reading problems and embarrassment in class consistently were identified as leading to disengagement with school and subsequent behavioural difficulties. Low self-esteem, frustration, and undirected anger characterized many of the students.

The youth who were recruited to participate in the demonstration classroom were, with a few exceptions, aged 15 and 16 and were nominally eligible for grade 10, although most had not passed a class in several years. They had

either dropped out of school or were judged by teachers, counsellors and parents as likely to do so.

A number of the students had criminal records and had participated in illegal activities, such as car theft, drug dealing, and street violence. Most had some experience with the juvenile justice system. A majority of the students had experienced physical violence either as perpetrators, victims or both. Some students had insecure and threatening home lives, while a minority had stable homes and supportive parents. The average reading level of students entering the program in the first two years of operation (as determined by the Woodcock Reading Mastery Test) was below grade 6. None of the students reported that they read for pleasure. Most indicated they had never read a book.

"I had never read a book in my life until I came to this school. I was assigned novels in elementary and in high school but I never read them. I just read the backs of the books or I'd look it up on the Internet.

I think a huge part of that was, well, I don't like when people tell me what to do and especially if I don't like that person and I didn't like the teachers at high school at all but the teachers here are awesome.

We had to read five or ten minutes at the beginning of every class. At first I'd just pretend to read but then I'd start getting into it and that's when it began. I think that's when I sort of changed to a way better attitude. I started actually talking more. Just because of the reading I would feel more comfortable around students and the teachers and I'd leave myself open more."

-- New School student with history of chronic truancy problems.

"By the way, so far, in school I've got nothing but perfect scores on all my assignments."

-- Email from the same student
during his first semester back in regular school.

LEARNING CHALLENGES

Simply teaching literacy is not an option. The program had to develop approaches to helping the students overcome a wide variety of challenges.

Many (though certainly not all) of the students at the New School suffered from highly turbulent lives, family instability, violence, and substance abuse — all of which interfered with their ability to focus on their school work and develop productive behaviours. A full-time counsellor was employed to assist the students cope with crises and develop better understanding, skills, and resiliency related to social and emotional issues. The counsellor also provided referral information and advocacy for families who were trying to access the social support network. In order to be successful in improving the students' literacy skills, it also had to address other key challenges.

Social and Emotional Barriers

The program used a coaching or "cognitive apprenticeship" model to help students grow as individuals, as family members, and as members of various communities, including the New School community. To undo some of the negative survival strategies that students had developed over the years and to help them find new ways of coping, the program provided workshops on community building, group decision making, conflict resolution, and problem solving. Topics such as empathy, trust, communication, group accountability, codes of silence,

and "restorative action" were discussed. Learning activities were designed to help these concepts take hold. As part of this work, students were engaged in group projects, such as developing a code of conduct or a harassment policy for the school. Students reflected on both the work they did and the processes that were effective (or not) as they tried to move jointly through these projects.

An important group building tool was the use of a weekly "round" in which both staff and students were encouraged to build connections with each other by revealing information about themselves. Initially, the information shared was superficial (what I did over the weekend), but as students gained trust in each other and greater self-awareness and confidence, they were able to share more personal information (how I feel about the incident in school yesterday) and respond to others with interest and empathy. Most of the students made substantial gains in social maturity. This is critical since there seemed to be a strong relationship between the development of affective skills and the students' ability to engage the tasks necessary for cognitive development.

Emotional Instability

Having been pushed to the margins of school because of reading difficulties, the students often found it hard to relate to other kids. They trusted neither the staff nor their peers. Not having been successful in school made them reluctant to take risks. They had low expectations of themselves and of others and had learned to tune out when they did not understand something and to "lay low" in hopes of disappearing in the crowd.

Some students were quick to get angry and erupt, many had difficulty working with others, and most lacked emotional security and a sense of self-efficacy. Initially, the students had difficulty sitting quietly and listening to a teacher. They resorted to their previous practices of either zoning out, bothering their neighbours, or disrupting the class. Students had difficulty separating incidents at home and on the streets from the classroom. With limited ability to resolve inner conflict, anger, frustration and hurt, these issues were often carried into the classroom.

For many of the students, "back to basics" meant learning how to sit quietly in a chair, face the teacher, and speak at appropriate times. Ultimately, with the benefit of coaching, modeling, and counselling, the students learned how to listen attentively, take notes, and ask appropriate questions, but they were incapable of doing so initially.

Limited Literacy Skills

One thing all of the students had in common was their inability to read for any sustained period. The task simply did not come easily to any of them, so they

chose not to try. One cannot improve reading skills without working at it. To establish an environment in which students could privately work on their reading skills, the teaching staff initiated a 15-minute period of sustained silent reading at the beginning of each class. Students chose books that interested them from the class library and were asked to sit quietly and read. At first nearly all of the students groaned that they "had to read" and showed their lack of motivation by glancing back and forth between the clock, other students, and periodically their book. For some, this appeared to be physically exhausting. Within a month, however, most of the students were engaged in their reading, and expressed enthusiasm that they "get to read" at the beginning of class. As the year progressed, several students (all previously non-readers) had to be asked to stop reading their books hidden under the table while other topics were being taught.

Lack of Critical Thinking and Collaboration Skills

A number of the students lived in environments that offered few opportunities to develop skill sets related to critical thinking, such as analyzing an event, predicting consequences, or relating prior information to new information. They did not expect stories or information to make sense, found it difficult to predict future events in a short story, were often stumped by relatively simple questions as to cause and effect, and were silent when asked to contribute an idea or state a reasoned opinion. To develop these skill sets, the teaching staff incorporated a strategy of using simple stories and texts that allowed them to walk students through the process of analysis, repeating, and highlighting key information as they went along. Over time, the students improved in their ability to analyze and comprehend various types of text, to make connections betweens stories or articles, and relate themes to their lives and current events.

Traditional academic programs focus on individual development in a group context, but little or no social interaction is required as part of the class. However, success in the rest of life (work, family, peer relations) requires the ability to function in collaboration with others. Like most skills, collaboration must be learned through practice. Trying to work in small groups proved frustrating to the students, since they lacked the skills for making a case or given an opinion, asking leading questions, making collaborative decisions, or for coming to a consensus. Given their frustration, it became clear that skills related to teamwork needed to be introduced slowly and taught and modeled explicitly before students would be able to work together on pair activities or in group projects. Ultimately, most of the students gained the ability to work effectively in groups. Groups worked best when tasks were clearly structured, goals were well defined, and when something was at stake (such as group tests and competitions).

Challenges Related to Textbooks

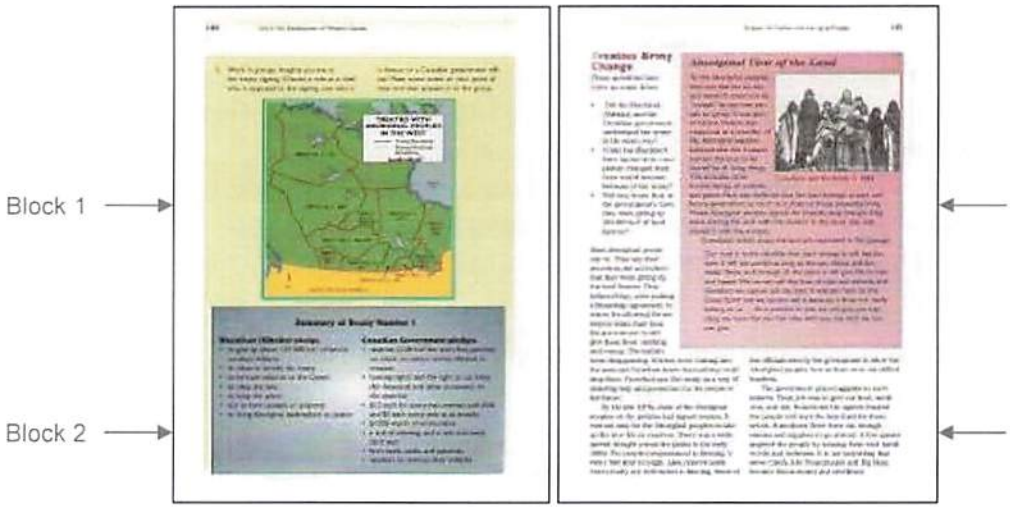
When they entered the program the students could not or would not read textbooks, even those written at a relatively low level. Not only were the students' basic reading skills weak but they also demonstrated a strong aversion to reading texts of any kind, particularly an academic textbook. This was not surprising given their general lack of literacy skills and their previous negative experiences in school trying to learn from textbooks. Consequently, reading materials were developed for the students that, while informative and designed to be challenging, did not have the weight or appearance of a textbook. Colourful graphics and "sidebar" information were also included to make connections with additional content while keeping the focus clearly on the main content.

Generally, students found the created materials to be interesting and accessible, although some were clearly too long and a few beyond their ability to comprehend. Nevertheless, the students needed to be able to learn from textbooks when they transitioned back into the regular school system. Consequently, the district's new textbook for grade 10 social studies, *Flashback Canada*[2] was chosen as the primary (more traditional) teaching tool for the course. The textbook has a contemporary feel to it with lots of colour, illustrations, and supplemental information provided, often in coloured blocks on the page. Moreover, it is written at around an 8th grade reading level. Nevertheless, the students had great difficulty with the textbook and reacted negatively to reading it — sometimes by expressing they did not want to read it; at other times by simply not doing so. These were the same students who had embraced the project-produced science readings, which were written at a higher reading level.

Several possible explanations were offered by staff. One was that the subject matter is less interesting and therefore not as engaging. Another is that the students seemed overwhelmed when holding the 350 page textbook, even though they were read less than half of the content. It became clear that they did not have the strategies necessary to navigate the often confusing though colourful array of information. Students who have experience reading textbooks would likely not have similar problems. But for New School students with their very limited experience, it was all a jumble. They had difficulty identifying which information on the page was most important, which was part of a sequence of information, and which was just supplemental.

[2] J. Bradley Cruxton, W. Douglas Wilson, *Flashback Canada* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Pages from History Textbook



Note the four separate blocks of information in these textbook pages. Block 1 is a group exercise; Block 2 is a summary of a treaty; Block 3 is a narrative description of how treaties brought change to Aboriginal peoples; and Block 4 is a description of Aboriginal beliefs related to land. Each deals with a separate, though related, part of the story of Canadian government treaties with Aboriginal groups. But the students were confused as to which information they needed to know and where they should begin reading.

Pages Created for the New School Project

Key elements of the page design on the left include a central column that includes all core material. The single, relatively narrow column provides a linear path through essential content. A compelling graphic leads the story and there is supplemental sidebar information. Using spaces between paragraphs, rather than indentations, creates a more open and less burdensome look to the text and gives students visual respite from the wall of text. Using both sides for supplemental information, however, can lead to confusion. The simplified design on the right also uses a single column for core information. Small illustrative graphics are inserted into the text and a somewhat wider sidebar is used for supplemental content.

Skimming and scanning (as opposed to reading in depth) is the primary strategy used by students with low literacy skills when reading textbooks. The placement of multiple bits of information on the page with little clear indication of which information is more important is particularly problematic with this kind of student. Their eyes tend to dart back and forth looking for key information in hopes of not having to bear the burden of reading it all. Clearly, additional strategies are required. To that end, the project team created a *Guide to Surviving a Textbook*, which provides a range of strategies and activities designed to familiarize students with ways textbooks are typically designed and help them to efficiently read through the text and gather the information they need.

The functional ability for students to comprehend information from a textbook is as important (perhaps more so in the short-term) as are the literacy skills required to read a manual, comprehend a work order, or complete the five sentence paragraph (likely more important in life after school).

Issues Related to Homework

However, few of the New School students had previously developed even the rudimentary skills and habits required to do homework. In addition, many of the students lived in households that were not conducive to doing homework; many did not have a private quiet space available; and some parents offered little or no support. In order to assist students to develop homework study skills and the habit of completing their work, a "homework club" was initiated where students could go before or after their class session. At first this was presented as a voluntary activity — students were strongly urged to attend but not required. Ultimately, it was made mandatory for most second-year students. The homework club was staffed with an experienced instructor and often included one or two volunteers who worked one-on-one with students. To some extent, all students took advantage of the homework club; some were diligent and were able to complete all of their homework consistently; others simply put in their time and did not work efficiently.

The effort and expense of maintaining the homework club yielded mixed results, causing staff and researchers to question its worth. The consensus was that if the homework club were introduced to students as an ongoing and required activity, it would extend the daily learning period and, perhaps most importantly, better prepare students for traditional classes. However, a significant amount of time would have to be allocated to work with the students during school time to model and reinforce productive homework strategies and habits. It is fair to say that a fully successful approach to homework was not found during the study period.

PROGRAM DESIGN

The program had to meet the changing and often conflicting multiple needs of the students, the staff, and the system.

The New School model is designed as one of high expectations and correspondingly high support. Classes are small, with 20 or fewer students in attendance. The ratio of student to instructor or instructional aide is around 10 to 1. A full-time onsite counsellor works closely with the instructional team. Students are expected to maintain a high attendance rate and be on time to classes. Parents or guardians are contacted immediately when a student does not show up for classes.

A Mix of Traditional and Innovative Approaches

Teachers present short lectures on academic and pre-academic subjects, use multimedia to introduce and reinforce key concepts, facilitate discussions on topics (often in small groups), and assist students individually to improve both literacy and behavioural skills. Students are expected to meet clearly defined performance standards in completing projects.

The New School uses an integrated approach to learning, with an overriding focus on the development of literacy skills in the context of both academic and pre-academic subjects. Materials are specifically designed to engage students based on their literacy levels and interests. These core aspects of the program

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model were in place from the beginning. However, specific approaches to instruction and curriculum content evolved over time.

Evolutionary Design Based on Student Needs

There were several major changes to the learning and support model during the first three years of the project. It was initially designed as a literacy-only program for youth who had dropped out of school or were at high risk of doing so because of their extremely limited literacy skills. As such, District 36 administrators felt that a half-day program for one year would be sufficient to raise the literacy skills of most eligible youth. Additionally, they thought that a half-day program would be more attractive to disaffected youth who for the most part had quit attending for any time. Consequently, two groups of students (forty in all) were enrolled in two half-day sessions. However, shortly after the program began, the project team was informed that the students must also be taught grade 10 academic subjects. With this change, staff and researchers were concerned that, the students' many deficits (literacy, academic, social, emotional, behavioural), would take longer than one year to overcome. At the end of the first year, it was clear that these concerns were justified.

Although significant progress had been accomplished by the students during the first year, there was insufficient time to adequately cover the grade 10 academic subjects. Only by the end of the first year did the students seem able to productively engage the subjects. Consequently, a two-year intervention was designed and staff recommended that over half of the students return for a second year. Most of these students recognized that they needed the assistance and committed to adding another year to their high school career. Other students chose to transition to other high school options.

The second year of operation was the first full test of the new program design. In addition to the first group of students who enrolled for a second year, a new group started the now two-year program. As the year progressed, it became increasingly clear that for most students enrolled in the second year program it was still a major challenge to cover all of the academic subjects, literacy skills, and emotional and social development. Nevertheless, the majority were able to positively transition to other school options by the end of their second year.

Under the revised design, the New School students' first year program emphasized the development of literacy skills, study skills, social and emotional skills, and learning background knowledge generally related to tenth grade academic subjects. These students (nearly all previous chronic truants) maintained an attendance rate in excess of 90% and almost all returned for the second year of the program. Nearly all of these students were able to transition to other school options at the end of their second year.

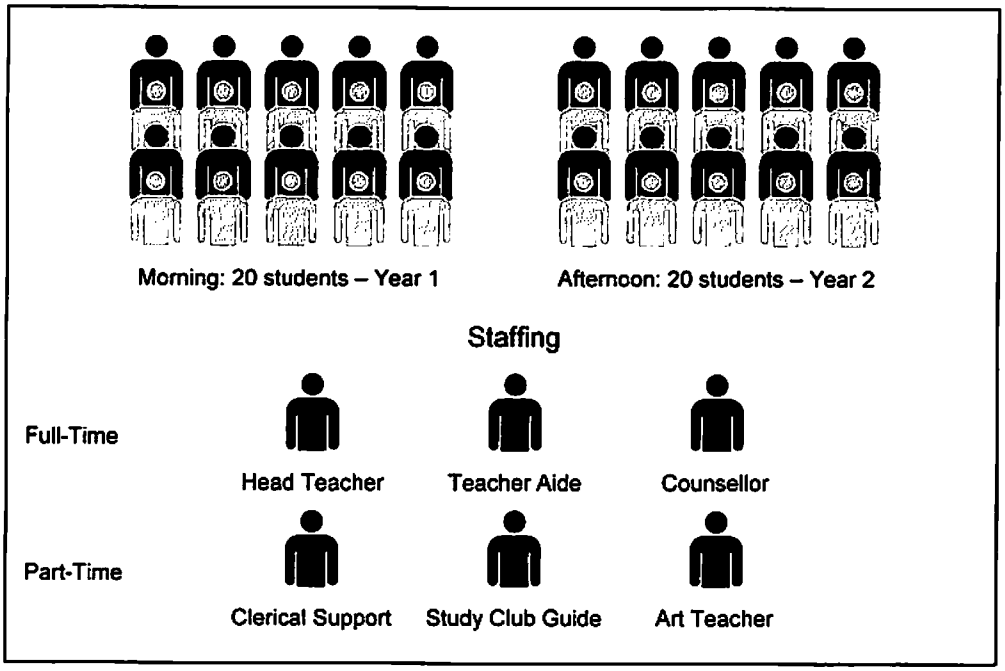
Full-Time, Two-Year Program Optimal

Even with its additional year, by the spring of 2005, the half-day two-year program was found to be insufficient to adequately cover all of the academic knowledge required for 10th grade, especially since the province instituted a new requirement for grade 10 provincial exams that applied toward graduation.

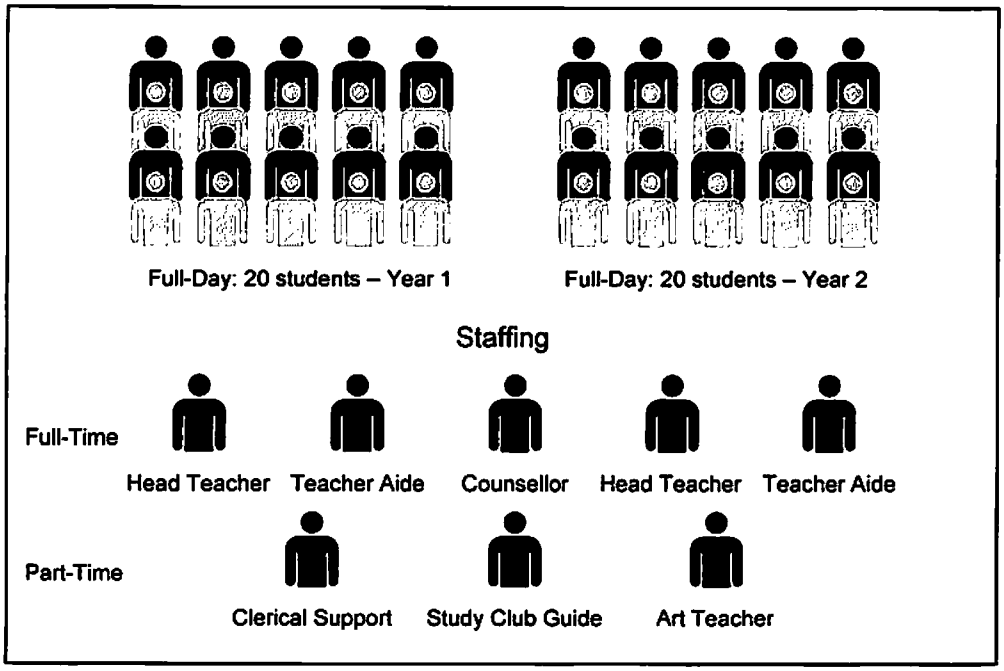
After a cost-benefit analysis was prepared, showing the affordability of a proposed full-day schedule, and the potential positive impact on students, School District 36 (Surrey) chose to extend the school day for the students to full-time and to hire another teaching team to maintain the numbers of students currently enrolled in the program. The research team believes this full-day, two-year model has the most promise for impacting the multiple needs of students similar to those enrolled at the New School.(The following page illustrates how the staffing changed for the fourth year of operation.)

District 36 was able to afford these enhanced educational and counselling services because the province provides additional funding for students with special needs. Instead of dumping the additional dollars into the general fund, they were allocated to provide direct services to the students whose deficits generated the income.

Staffing Pattern 2002 – 2004



Staffing Pattern 2005



Approach to Instruction

The New School program proved to be a highly successful model for working with disengaged students who face literacy challenges and live in circumstances that put them at risk.

The New School program design built on the best available research for working with youth who were out of school or on their way out of school, and evolved over time. The approach drew on two major sets of studies: evaluation studies highlighting effective practices for working with youth-at-risk, and research studies focused on adolescent literacy and struggling readers. There is a consensus among these studies that young people are complex and their lives often turbulent, that there are no quick fixes, and that a one size fits all approach is not likely to be successful given the wide range of challenges confronting young people who are not achieving in school. In its approach, the New School followed the recommendations that suggested that educational services for youth at risk should be offered as part of a comprehensive model delivered by professional staff with the autonomy to respond to problems in a thoughtful, timely, and respectful manner.

To help students increase literacy skills and build background knowledge, the New School implemented an approach to instruction that emphasized multiple opportunities to learn difficult materials with plenty of time on task and stressed

strategy-based learning, explicit teaching, and learning how to learn across all subject areas. This model resulted in greatly improved rates of attendance, highly significant gains in reading skills, a considerable reduction in physical violence, zero interaction with the criminal justice system, and important growth in social and emotional development.

Classroom-based Approach

The school used a classroom-based approach emphasizing community and incorporated social and emotional development as a key feature of instruction. All policies and processes of the school were transparent to both staff and students, and teaching was focused on making the invisible visible to students who had struggled throughout their academic career. Students created a code of conduct and the values by which the school was organized. The steps in progressive discipline and the importance of harmony and making amends were not mere classroom topics but a lived reality. As a result, incidents of aggressive behaviour and violence decreased and social responsibility increased as students were provided with new ways of learning in school and being in the world. Staff modeled empathy and caring, set high expectations, and provided multiple forms of support to help students meet those expectations.

Students who had failed most of their classes in the past were able to do the work required to gain credit for Grade 10 courses that met the core standards specified by the province. Teachers explained facts, processes and strategies, and used compelling visual aides to explain complex ideas. They taught with texts that had big ideas but not overly complex language, and demonstrated strategies for reading writing and making sense of standard textbooks use an approach known as "cognitive apprenticeship." In the end, students learned how academic challenges could be sorted out and made manageable, whether there were word problems in math that seemed impenetrable at first, a poem that was slow to reveal its secrets, or the evolving stages in the history of the Canadian Federation.

Reading across the Curriculum

Reading, the key skill necessary for success in school, in training, and at work, was central to the curriculum. Ongoing professional development offered insights into the research in adolescent literacy and strategy lessons were developed to try out, adapt, teach, and re-adapt. Successful high school teachers were consulted to build a rich curriculum around novels that asked students to read, discuss, analyze and write while they developed a keen sense of the key features of fiction and a sound basis in language and grammar. Students read books of their choice individually at school and at home as homework, and they read short stories and poems together with the teacher in class. They read novels in the study club and as homework and worked in groups to understand them and connect them to their own lives and the wider world of ideas. Students

wrote in logs and in their reflection journals, created their own poems and stories and took notes on the information they read on-line. They completed research projects and produced ads and posters using computer-based technology. The results included significant increases in reading skills and remarkable changes in reading practices and habits of the mind as students moved from "having to read" to "getting to read" (and then having to stop to do other work).

Focus on Fundamental Knowledge and Skills

A focus on fundamental knowledge, skills (both big ideas and important details) and lots of time on task helped students increase not only their reading comprehension skills, but also the background knowledge that they needed to make sense of much of the print that appeared around them, not just in novels and textbooks, but in newspapers, announcements, and manuals. Students worked hard to develop the sophisticated academic vocabulary necessary to understand the texts they were reading and through the vocabulary developed concepts related to the big ideas that were part of the curriculum. They were involved in word studies that taught them about Roman and Greek roots and the prefixes and suffixes that extend those words. They created personal dictionaries and glossaries of terms, studied them and then showed off their knowledge in games such as Jeopardy and Memory. They watched popular TV shows such as Monster Garage and used them to identify concepts related to the scientific method (hypothesis testing, for example) and to the theory of Multiple Intelligences. As a result, students became learners who knew that not only were they smart in different ways, each was capable of understanding Grade 10 materials and had the competence to tackle books, novels, and on-line readings, although he/she might not be able to understand each text fully. In the end, all students knew that they could "get" academic materials if they followed a series of steps, used strategies that successful learners use, made use of available resources, asked for help when necessary, and acted in such a way that the other person was glad to help.

Multiple Ways to Learn and Grow

The vast majority of the New School students had been in trouble one way or the other in the past. Progressive discipline and restorative action helped students to understand the importance of an environment that is safe for all and see the value in making amends when harmony was upset. A sense of being appreciated and loved as human beings, even when behaviours and actions made them somewhat less than endearing, helped students develop trust and accept consequences.

The school set high expectations for students who previously did not do well in school and were alienated and disengaged from the learning process. These expectations included not only academic achievement but extend to social interactions and individual behaviours. To help students meet expectations, a great

deal of support was provided, through ongoing classroom teaching that included building on strengths and knowledge of the students, the use of visual materials to create a context and build interest, and ongoing scaffolding to make difficult information accessible.

Art and technology provided an immediate way to success not dependent on a student's ability to deal with dense texts. Telling their story through drawings, paintings, photography, sculpture, and animation allowed for new forms of self-expression. Projects that involved PowerPoint and Photoshop technologies helped students develop work that was "edgy" and spoke to their desire to be seen as cool by their peers.

Challenges

Challenges remained, however. Those students and their families who had started in crisis did not magically move to having a stable life. Most remained vulnerable and their situations continued to be tenuous. Progress was never linear — students moved two steps forward and then had a set-back, although most became more resilient, improved a sense of self-efficacy, and used appropriate strategies for advocating for themselves and others. Significant academic challenges confront students with severe learning disabilities as they transition to other academic institutions where less instructional and counselling support is available. While these students may continue to struggle, they see themselves in a different light and are aware of the strengths they have and the support they should ask for.

The New School was not successful with all students and won't be in the future. Students with active addictions, severe behaviour problems, or cognitive challenges that make it extremely difficult to learn are better served in programs specifically designed for them. Those whose lives are in such turmoil that they cannot (or choose not to) continue will remain a heartbreak as the staff ponders what could have been done, if anything, or what could be done in the future to help these children and prevent them from being lost.

Nevertheless, all in all, the New School model was decidedly successful. High levels of attendance, increases in reading scores, growth in social responsibility, and progress in academic achievement attest to that fact. What made the difference? In the view of researchers as well as staff, it was not so much the individual pieces, many used in other schools and in other areas, as it was an overall approach focused on excellence and delivered by a staff that never lost hope in the ability of young people to change in a positive direction.

PROMISING PRACTICES

There are no magic bullets. A comprehensive and integrated set of practices allowed the New School staff to meet the multiple needs of students.

The following approaches to instruction and support used at the New School were identified by staff, researchers and students as contributing to the success of the program. It should be noted that experience at the New School suggests that these practices are most effective when used in combination. Applying individual practices while ignoring others will likely result in diminished effectiveness.

1. Offer a comprehensive and holistic approach.

The model presents a comprehensive and holistic approach to teaching and learning. It recognizes that literacy development goes well beyond reading and writing and seeks to present academic content in ways that are relevant and engaging to youth. Art and technology are connected to other subjects and reading, writing, and problem solving are emphasized across the curriculum. Reading includes both intensive, strategy-based reading, as well as extensive, recreational reading (silent reading). Students are encouraged to become critical readers and writers, to challenge what they read and hear (through ads, television, and popular culture) and

to express their opinions in a reasoned manner. Students are also challenged to think more deeply, read and write more attentively, and draw connections between subjects. Learning how to learn is emphasized through both the use of learning strategies (question generating, summarizing, predicting and confirming, identifying challenges in learning, recognizing one's progress) and of study skills (keeping track of assignments, time management, making full use of available time).

2. Focus on youth with significant literacy issues.

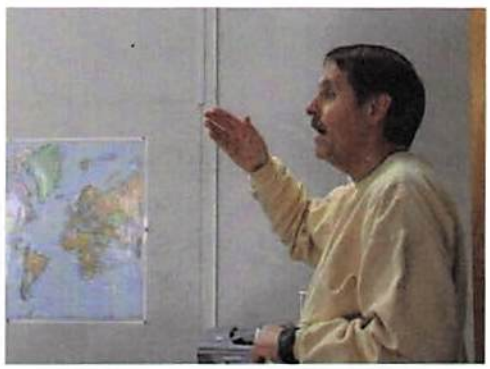
The program focuses on at-risk youth with significant literacy challenges who have been unsuccessful in other school options. Although the New School model is designed to cope with a broad range of behavioural issues, its primary focus is on youth who have reading problems that prevent them from succeeding in school. The New School model is not designed as a catchall for at-risk youth. Because of the New School's emphasis on literacy development, students who present principally behavioural or attitudinal problems, but who are otherwise literate, are inappropriate for the program. They do not have patience for and are not benefited by the program's emphasis on remedial instruction. Likewise, youth who have neurological damage (such as FAS) that inhibits learning or behavioural control benefit little from the program design and interfere with the learning of others. The materials and teaching strategies are designed to assist students who read from grade levels three to seven. Nevertheless, some students who tested below grade three were successful in the program and other youth who scored above grade seven also benefited. Recruitment should be flexible enough to accept students who may be somewhat outside the target reading levels but who have attributes that indicate a need for the program and potential for success. (High motivation is a key indicator.)

3. Establish a safe and separate learning environment.

For students to take on their learning challenges they must be willing to take risks. To take risks, they must feel physically and emotionally safe while in the classroom. A supportive and safe learning environment doesn't simply happen; it must be created. Bullying, harassment, intimidation, or making fun of other students must be curtailed from the very beginning of classes. Providing class in a facility that is removed from the traditional

school is recommended. Peer support for positive or negative behaviour is a significant factor in determining how students will behave. A positive culture of engagement and appropriate behaviour can be developed within the classroom, but it risks being undermined if the students mix with outside peers before and after class and during breaks. Establishing the classroom away from other classes helps protect the learning environment from students over whom the program has no control. Even in an isolated setting, controlling this kind of behaviour is a challenge for many students, most of whom are well practiced in these behaviours. Initially, basic rules of conduct and the reasons for them are explained by staff. Soon, the students are asked to consider what kind of learning environment they want and to come up with their own set of class rules. The sooner students buy into a common set of desired behaviours and learn both self-control and how to assist other students to control their behaviours, the easier it is for them to learn and for teachers to teach. Building positive behaviours cannot be done by edict. It takes a significant investment of time and consistent modelling by the staff as well as a deft non-confrontational hand in dealing with instances of negative behaviour.

4. Hire committed and qualified professional staff.



Whenever a group of high need and often adversarial students are aggregated into the same classroom, highly committed and qualified professional staff are be required. The specific nature of those qualifications, however, is important to consider. Research at the New School and elsewhere[3] indicates that harsh discipline, leading to suspension and expulsion, tend to increase aggressive behaviour in students and further breakdown of discipline. Patience and an ability to confront negative behaviour without resorting to yelling, harsh language, and intimidation are essential attrib-

[3] Including a paper written for the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Risk Factors for Delinquency: An Overview*, by Michael Shader, which states: "...suspension and expulsion do not appear to reduce undesirable behaviour, and both are linked to increased delinquent behaviour."

utes for a teacher in this setting. Close teamwork, in which another teacher, teacher aide or counsellor is available to work with a disruptive student, is another factor in maintaining classroom discipline while minimizing disruptive confrontations. Because of ever-changing situations, staff members must have the authority to act individually and collectively to assist students as needed. For this to work well, the staff must be able to work together as a tightly knit team. New School staff felt strongly that their non-hierarchical approach to instructional planning and counselling was key to their ability to act appropriately and efficiently with students.

5. Implement progressive discipline and restorative action.

The concept of progressive discipline proved to be essential for the success of the program. A rigid "one strike and you're out" zero tolerance policy can lead to counter-productive antagonistic confrontations that often result in the termination of a student who greatly needs the assistance of the program. The New School evolved a zero tolerance but progressive discipline process that did not accept anti-social and destructive behaviour but allowed students to grapple with their issues through counselling and coaching and reintegrate positively back into the class community.

6. Keep classes small.

Maintaining small classes (20 or fewer students) is critical for the operation of the class. All of the students enrolled in the New School face significant multiple challenges to learning. Regular school classes may have only two or three students with similar needs (and potential to disrupt the classroom). These students often require individual attention. Maintaining class ratios of around one teaching professional to ten students increases the likelihood that adequate and appropriate learning opportunities can occur.

7. Use team teaching.

Two teachers (or a teacher and highly qualified aide) in the classroom at one time are necessary. The model uses a "soft discipline" approach in which one teacher can attend to the discipline support needs of individual students while the other teacher leads learning activities. A single teacher is too often drawn into confrontations with students just to retain control of the classroom. Two teachers are also required for working with

students in groups (necessary for differentiated instruction) and to deal with contingencies that require a teacher to be out of the classroom.

8. Have a full-time counsellor as part of the team.

A full-time counsellor (with a case load no greater than 40) is needed to assist students with short-term crisis management and long-term social and emotional development. The research indicates that many of the students suffer from highly turbulent lives, family instability, violence and substance abuse — all of which interfere with their ability to focus on their school work and develop productive behaviours. Because the students' ability to learn is highly impacted by their families' wellbeing, it is important for the counsellor to also provide referral information and advocacy for families needing to access the social support network.

9. Use collaborative case management.

Collaborative case management is an essential component of the program model. New School staff met weekly for two to three hours to discuss student progress and challenges and to develop strategies to assist individual students who were having academic, emotional or behavioural problems. The teachers and counsellor coordinated their activities to provide a consistent and clear message. Without this time to review progress and develop action plans, the program would not be able to cope with the many challenges faced by the youth. Given the time required for case management, the need to meet with parents and students individually, and the work required to prepare for the program's rich instruction model, it is highly recommended that one day a week be set aside for these activities. The program staff felt the reduction in teaching time was more than offset by the improved quality and appropriateness of instruction and counselling that resulted from the time spent in planning.

10. Implement a two-year program.

A two-year program is required to overcome the multiple deficits faced by the students. Not only must they learn how to read and write, but they must also learn background information and basic academic skills they missed by not attending classes, not paying attention, or by not being able to read the material they were given. Moreover, a significant amount of work must be done in developing study skills, self-control, empathy for others, per-

sonal resiliency, and the ability to work in groups — all important factors for success. And of course they must learn the academic subjects required for graduation and moving on in school. Initially, the New School tried to accomplish much of this in one year. It proved impossible. When students were given an opportunity to attend for another year, a majority of them and their parents accepted the opportunity. Although the project team initially thought that it might be difficult to recruit for a two-year 10th grade program, it was not. The second group of young people who enrolled at the New School chose the opportunity to build essential skills that would help them succeed in school fully knowing it would extend their high school career by a year.

11. Provide a full-day program.

Although during its first three years the New School demonstrated substantial success in engaging youth, keeping them in school, fostering social and emotional growth, building literacy skills, and creating active readers, the students and staff never seemed to have enough time to fully address academic subjects or to provide enriched learning experiences. This was in large part because the program operated on a half-day schedule (3 hours a day for 4 days a week). Students were in class approximately 12 hours a week, less than half of the hours of students in the standard school program. This gap was mitigated somewhat by the New School's intensive instruction schedule and its focus on essential content, but the students still needed more contact hours with teachers. Students began attending for a full-day schedule in September 2005. The research team considers having students attend at least 24 hours a week is critical if the program is to adequately address the multiple social, emotional, and behavioural issues, remedial needs, and academic subjects needed to prepare students to complete high school.

12. Provide explicit instruction across the curriculum.

Explicit instruction is a systematic instructional approach that incorporates group instruction with a high level of teacher and student interaction, close alignment of curriculum, a focus on big ideas, building on background knowledge, reinforcement of fundamental skills, modeling, scaffolding, guided practice, corrective action, and feedback. Explicit instruction is part of all aspects of the curriculum. Students must not only be told to read about a topic; they must be taught how to read the text. They must not only be told how to behave in class; they must be helped to understand appropriate behaviour and shown how to gain control of their anxiety and antagonism. Students with severe reading challenges cannot learn well primarily from text-based materials. Short lectures, multimedia, and hands-on learning are more effective approaches – at least initially. Programs that

use self-paced independent learning materials (requiring relatively high levels of reading skills and self-discipline) are not appropriate for the type of student enrolled at the New School. Although students can benefit from one-on-one tutorial instruction, there are insufficient resources to use this approach primarily. Moreover, there is significant benefit to be derived from working in groups of various sizes.

13. Teach students how to learn.

Most students discover successful learning strategies through experience. For the most part, the students at the New School had not done so. They had to be taught how to learn. This includes strategies for organizing materials, focusing on assignments, coping with distractions, reading various types of text, and avoiding distractions in school, at home, and from friends. It is important for teachers to recognize this limitation in the students and to expressly teach and reinforce the basic skills and strategies of learning.

14. Implement project-based learning.

Project-based learning activities are an important component of the program design. They provide alternative ways to engage topics that do not rely principally on reading. The minimal class time during the first three years significantly curtailed these activities. Nevertheless, the weekly art class, which took up nearly one-quarter of the schedule, focused almost entirely around project-based learning. A variety of other technology-based projects were integrated into various other curriculum activities. With an expanded full-day schedule, project-based learning can be implemented across the curriculum.

15. Focus on social and emotional development.

Social and emotional development is as essential as learning basic reading and writing skills. Many of the kids who entered the program exhibited lack

of self-control and aggressive behaviour. Some were highly introverted and had difficulty relating to others. Violence had been a significant factor in many of their lives. The students' inability to relate well with others combined with low self-esteem inhibited both their own learning and that of others. Explicit instruction, modeling (cognitive apprenticeship), and a variety of activities related to building empathy with others, controlling angry and disruptive impulses, and building a positive lifestyle are essential requirements for ensuring the opportunity to learn.

16. Provide regular access to creative activities.

The creative arts (visual, performing, literary) offer multiple ways for students to experience success while they build their literacy skills. Consistently high attendance on "art days" was evidence of engagement. The arts offer opportunities to engage all of the curriculum topics in creative and meaningful ways that reinforce more traditional learning experiences. During its first three years, the New School used a model that focused on the visual arts taught by skilled visual artists. While this offered a valuable experience for students, a broader exposure to multiple arts and other professional artists is recommended. The weekly three-hour art class at the New School consumed nearly 25% of the in-class time. Given the overall limited class time, this level of commitment is difficult to justify. However, given the nature of the art projects, allotting fewer than 2.5 hours (the actual length of involvement) would have been difficult as well. Even with the half-day program, staff felt the art time was valuable. With a full-day schedule, three hours a week for arts activities seems even more reasonable.

17. Integrate technology in instruction and student activities.

As with the arts activities, the use of technology in the classroom was seen as both positive and negative during the period of the study. The main classroom was set up with a data projector and surround sound system to facilitate presentations and

build engagement using video, PowerPoint and the Web. It was also intended to allow projection of projects created by students on computers that were available on the periphery of the room. However, during the project study, the functionality of the technology was problematic. When it worked well, the technology was clearly an asset; when it did not, it was frustrating to students and staff alike. The use of technology in its various forms can play an extremely valuable function in facilitating instruction and allowing students to conduct research and work on class projects. Key to success is to have computers and a network that are powerful enough to support learning projects coupled with (and this is essential) technical support to maintain the system at full capacity. In addition, staff must have the basic technology skills to integrate its use into their classes.

18. Conduct regular assessment and data tracking.

Assessment and data tracking were important components of the New School study. They are also valuable in the ongoing operation of the program. In order for data collection to be of use and cost-effective, staff must have sufficient time to review the information and use it for planning instruction and support. Effective ways for collecting and processing data must be used. Among the data collected at the New School, a standardized reading assessment (the Woodcock Reading Test) was perhaps the most important. It provides information on how well students deal with subcomponents of reading, such as vocabulary, decoding, word recognition and comprehension. This test is administered uniformly three times over the student's two-year period (upon entry, end of first year, end of second year). The test results provide key information to assist in addressing specific literacy needs of the students. Other forms of data (demographics, attendance, academic performance, and student outcomes) are collected and reviewed by staff both to indicate progress and to document performance. Other measures that are useful to the New School staff include information on the social and emotional development of students (self-efficacy and social responsibility scales) that are used in individual counselling and group activities. Data collection and processing at this level is enhanced with dedicated clerical support.

19. Provide transition assistance.

Transition assistance and follow-up are key to helping students find appropriate options for continuing their education after completing the New School program. This activity was shared among the staff and involved extensive coordination with counselling staff in other district programs. In addition, providing some form of support and counselling (follow-up meetings with graduates, a study group, or an open door for informal support) for students adapting to a new school environment are important.

RESEARCH

The New School research is primarily a case study of a demonstration project designed to increase the literacy skills of youth designated at risk. As is true in all case studies, the research focused largely on qualitative data collected through observations and interviews. But data collection also included learner outcome data that was quantitative in nature. These included pre- and post-test scores on a standardized reading test collected from all students over their two-year period of attendance and scores on a scale capturing levels of social and emotional development (pre and post). Additional qualitative information was collected on an ongoing basis and individual profiles were created for each student.[4] Qualitative information was coded and analysed using standard ethnographic procedures. Descriptive data capturing the family circumstances of students' lives as well as their educational backgrounds and social and emotional well-being was collected through the New School Family Matrix and quantified using a five point scale (from "thriving" to "in crisis"). Taken together, qualitative and quantitative information yielded a rich picture of the students' skills, offered insights into the circumstances of their lives, and provided the basis for developing student profiles that were shared with counsellors in the programs to which students transitioned after the New School program.

[4] Profiles are available for research purposes. They are not available to the public in order to maintain student confidentiality.

ATTENDANCE

Regular attendance in a program is a key indicator of students' commitment to the educational program and evidence that a program meets their needs. It is also one of the most important measures of success for students at risk since interaction and engagement with literacy and academic content cannot happen unless students are at least physically present, if not always emotionally or cognitively engaged.

Previous to the New School, the vast majority of students had had problems with absenteeism, either because of chronic truancy or because of health issues. A fair number had missed classes in their old schools because they had been suspended. Several students mentioned skipping classes on a regular basis after attendance had been taken,[5] and many parents were aware of these problems but were at a loss of how to change the behaviour. For these parents, their children's previous lack of attendance had become a major source of frustration.

One of the key successes of the New School were was the extraordinary changes in attendance patterns. During the second year of the program, incoming students had an average attendance rate of 91% and continuing students had an average attendance rate of 76% percent[6].

What Made the Difference in Attendance?

> *"You have to like these kids and you can't fake it. They have to feel it and see it – it has to be real – those kids have a very fine radar for bullshit."*
>
> -- Mark McCue, Head Teacher

In the discussions with teachers, the on-site researcher, the counsellor and staff and in interviews with students and parents, the following factors were identified as having contributed to the relatively high levels of attendance of students at the New School:

- A comprehensive, well-ordered, program with highly qualified staff who showed students every day that they cared about them and believed in them.

[5] District data on previous attendance proved highly unreliable; getting an accurate count of days attended or not attended was not possible.

[6] This number refers to actual attendance in school and does not include excused absences.

- A focus on the class as a community where people helped each other, were there for each other and made efforts to restore harmony when someone was hurtproblems arose.
- A safe place to be with an educational program focused on helping each student grow and be successful in atmosphere of trust.
- A full-time counsellor who spent significant time in the classroom conducting workshops and also set up confidential counselling sessions and provided ongoing coaching to help students move their lives in new directions.
- Constant emphasis on the need to "be there" (i.e., to be physically, emotionally and cognitively present), to participate and engage the learning process. Students stressed the fact that there was no place to hide since teachers asked knew if students were in class (and showed that they cared).
- Teachers who questions about why kids were absent and then helped them to develop strategies for coping with barriers. ("It's better to come to class even if your homework is not done than to stay home and hide" was a message that stuck with students.)
- Immediate calls to parents twenty minutes after classes started to alert parents and to find out what problems might be occurring.
- A data management system designed to document attendance, coupled with processes for responding to crisis situations. (In one case, the researcher and the counsellor drove to the house of a student who had disengaged and was depressed because of a family break-up and asked him to get dressed and come to school.)
- Sharing of information of the attendance data being collected daily. Each student could see what percentage of attendance was achieved each month. (Students actually compared their attendance records and were proud of their record.)
- The counsellor willing to talk and work with parents to help them address problems they were facing and provided referrals to social service agencies.
- An atmosphere of hopefulness that provided an opportunity for a student to "reinvent" himself or herself, supported by teachers and a counsellor who believed in a student's capacity for change.

LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

Students who came to the New School were selected because they struggled with literacy. They had not had sufficient opportunity to develop the learning skills necessary for school success. As adolescents in conventional high schools, they were expected to have a great deal of prior knowledge and bring that knowledge to bear as they read. They were given ever more complex textbooks containing challenging content, content that contains multi-syllabic vocabulary that must be decoded and understood.

Upon entry, the vast majority of the New School students were very poor readers who functioned significantly below grade level in vocabulary knowledge, word attack skills (decoding and encoding) and, most importantly, reading comprehension. The reading skills of two students referred from other schools were close to grade level but they were admitted because of difficulties in other areas of literacy (poor math and writing skills). The project had multiple goals for these students: engage them with a variety of print, including poetry, prose and informational texts, and help them gain the knowledge, skills and strategies to "make meaning" and understanding of what they read. The project team wanted these students to develop a repertoire of strategies that would allow them to stick with a novel and understand its language, content and structure. They wanted the students to not be afraid of poetry, but to trust their skills of interpretation and become poetry writers themselves (they did much better at writing poetry than at writing short stories, for example). Most importantly, the team wanted them to become readers who could stick with a story even when it was not easy, enjoy the turn of a phrase, and look forward to picking up a book and reading it for the sheer pleasure of it. The team wanted this to be true for students who could read at the mid-range level (6^{th} to 8^{th} grade) but never did so (the group of "a-literate" students as the literature calls them). More importantly, the team wanted to see changes in those who were non-readers because they could barely understand what they were reading, those whose reading skills were equivalent to the skills of a student in 3^{rd} to 5^{th} grade. The project was successful on both counts: During their enrolment at the New School, all students read books; most developed a true appreciation for reading for pleasure.

Reading Gains

Students in the New School increased their reading comprehension scores (the true measure of reading for adolescents and adults) by three and a half years on average. These increases are particularly significant since youth overall tend to lose literacy skills over time rather than gain skills. The 2003 Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) showed an apparent decline from previous literacy scores among Canada's youth. Other research cited by the U.S. National Insti-

tute for Literacy and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy has also shown that adolescents and adults who struggle with reading tend to make slow progress. In addition, the progress that is made, while often observable to teachers, is not easily captured on standardized tests. Furthermore, older in-school students who have reading difficulties often experience a decrease in skills over time, due to non-engagement with school and literacy, lack of motivation, and limited time spent reading.

Given both the generally slow rate of change in reading skills as measured by standardized tests and the inability of these tests to capture many of the changes in reading strategies and reading practices, the results of the standardized reading test at the New School are quite significant: Students who completed the program increased their scores in *passage comprehension* (the essence of what it means to read with understanding) by 3.4 grades on average, moving from *a* 5.3 to 8.7 grade level equivalent over the span of 18 months of instruction. The overall reading cluster, made up of passage comprehension plus sight word recognition, decoding skills, and vocabulary knowledge, increased by 2.5 years over the same period. It is important to note that students reached these gains through participation in a half-day program where the majority of time was spent on areas only indirectly related to literacy acquisition, such as math and science, art, technology, and emotional and social development.

Students who entered the program during the second year, and who received 9 months of instruction, also made significant gains in their reading skills. Scores increased 2.1 years on average in passage comprehension from a mean score of 5.5 to 7.6 years grade level equivalent. Test analysis showed that these students had slightly lower foundation skills upon entry into the program than the original group, including lower skills in word recognition and word attack skills, and the gains they made in these sub-skills were slightly lower as well compared to the gains the original group of students had made during their first year in the program. Some of these students, however, were able to use compensatory strategies (such as being able to make connections between texts and between their life and what was read, reading and rereading assigned materials; discussing with others what was read) that allowed them to be successful. While these changes were observed by teachers, they were not captured on the standardized test.

As a group, students had become quite successful in increasing their reading skills, although some students continued to struggle. But, as is true of mean scores in general, average gains often mask individual differences and don't tell the full story of the students' progress across various dimensions of literacry, as the following student story illustrates.

Student Profile: *One of the program's success stories has been a young woman ("J.[7]") with extremely low skills in all areas of reading. J. couldn't read and didn't read. Staff discovered that her heroine was Buffy the Vampire Slayer and helped her find Web pages about her idol and information about the actress who played her. The teacher helped J. develop a number of strategies, such as sounding the names out slowly, for spelling the names of actors and actresses she wanted to "Google." J. took a stab at spelling, Google did the rest, and she started to read bits and pieces of information on-line. Staff encouraged her to try some of the easier novels during silent reading, and after some initial time of turning the pages without much understanding, J. became "hooked on books."*

J. lives with her mother, stepfather, and two younger brothers. During her first year in the program and for a large part of the second year (she repeated the Year 1 program because her reading skills were so low) there were also other family members including cousins living as a tight knit group who tried to stay apart from the world outside. All of the teenagers were severely limited in their interaction with the outside world. J. and the other children were not allowed to socialize outside the home, and the mother would accompany J. (who was sixteen) everywhere including to school and back. The mother reported that J.'s teachers had told her from elementary school on that J. had reading problems but in her words "they didn't have any programs for her, because of all the cuts and no one could help her."

J.'s reading ability upon entry into the program was very weak. Her score on the Woodcock Johnson Reading Assessment was a grade equivalency score of grade 2.0 and her passage comprehension was grade 2.5. Her decoding and word recognition skills were also a low 2.2. In addition, her knowledge of the world (a key component of reading comprehension) was quite limited since the world of ideas in which she lived was so small. Her math skills were very weak as well. She did not have much of a numbers sense and had very little grasp of basic math facts. At sixteen years of age, she was unable to add or subtract whole numbers.

J. made little discernable progress in her reading during the first year. Her overall score at the end of the year was still a disappointing grade 2.5 and her passage comprehension had risen only slightly to grade 2.7 from grade 2.5, although her engagement with books had increased significantly and she was excited about being able to read. Staff agreed that J. would benefit from a second year at the first level; J. repeated Year 1 and was quite happy to do so.

The results of her efforts in the second year were very encouraging. Although her overall reading score did not increase significantly (she scored grade 2.9 at the

[7] Initials have been changed to safeguard the anonymity of all the students.

end of this year, largely because her decoding skills did not improve). However, she made impressive gains in her passage comprehension: She scored grade 4.7 and improved her math skills to a level where she could handle fractions.

Raising a student's reading to a grade level equivalent of only 4.7 may not count as "success" to some. But the New School offered J. an opportunity to grow and develop strategies that made her a capable reader and a successful student. She read several books during the second year, took the initiative to get her own library card, and carefully selected three books to take along and read on her long bus trip to visit her grandmother in Alberta during the summer. J. also engaged in the academic reading that was part of the class, taking along several pages of the chapter on "Evolution" so she could explain "what really happened" to her grandmother who is very religious. In essence J. joined what Frank Smith has called "the reading club," the club of those who read books, love them and are able to talk about them in meaningful ways. J. read "Holes" (a book on many reading lists for middle schools) and explained the difference between the book and the movie to her brother (a good measure of understanding). She was an active member of her reading circle who came prepared to discuss characters, plots and key events, and was able to make connections to events in her own life. Although her skills remained relatively low, she had learned to use compensatory strategies that allowed her to understand much of what she was reading. As both her confidence and her competence improved, she developed a set of skills and abilities that will help her be successful in different kinds of environment, including education, training, and work. By staying with the school, she was able to transition to a vocational training co-op.

There were other students in the program with a reading profile similar to J.'s and who exhibited word identification and word attack skills below the fifth grade level. Several of these students managed to acquire the background knowledge and reading strategies that helped them improve their comprehension skills although they still struggled with basic decoding and word attack skills.

Discussion

How should this gap in skills be addressed? Recent scientific research suggests that a focus on these skills may not make a difference in the upper grades, although a systematic focus on these skills does make a difference for students who struggle with reading in the elementary grades.

For adolescents, however, the picture is slightly different. For this group, the research suggests that if decoding skills are included in the reading curriculum

they be taught within a larger context focused on comprehension (The National Reading Panel, 2000[8]).

Considering the literacy challenges confronting adolescents and adults, it is clear that students who can decode print, but fail to gain meaning from texts, cannot be considered successful readers. Nor are they likely to succeed in academic settings, in training, or in workplaces that make literacy demands beyond the most basic levels.

Seeing several of the students struggling with sub-skills of reading, the program incorporated some emphasis on decoding in the reading curriculum for students who lacked these skills. However, given the gains that students exhibited in the area of text comprehension, the program did well in staying the original course and continuing a strong emphasis on teaching the skills and strategies that help students read widely, read thoughtfully, make connections, and, above all, read with understanding, the very essence of what it means to read.

Changes in Reading Practices

The New School literacy component included various genres and stressed different purposes for reading (reading to do, reading to learn, reading to find information, reading for enjoyment). Teachers and students both reported that students increasingly read for pleasure — or as they said, "for fun." All students completed novels (most for the first time) both inside and outside of class. They also reported increased reading of informational texts, particularly periodicals and newspapers. The parents of one child indicated that they themselves had never been strong readers, but in order to encourage their son with his reading, they had initiated a family reading period in the evening where everyone sat and read for pleasure, demonstrating that a cross-generational transfer of reading can indeed be reciprocal.

By the second year, for many students, reading had become a normal part of their daily lives. Becoming "recreational readers" is a major step for students who in the past either could not handle reading assignments or refused to do assignments, and "hated" all forms of extended reading including short stories, novels, and poetry.

Other Changes Observed

- Students developed strategies for engaging with print, knowing what to do with a piece of text, and knowing how to approach a text.

[8] National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel.* Teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction. (NIH Publication No 00-4769), Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

- Students became more self-reflective, were able to identify their weaknesses in reading and writing, and became aware of what they needed to do to overcome barriers to reading.
- Students learned to work in groups as part of novel studies, reading and summarizing information, creating story grammars, and discussing their insights. They learned to make connections between what was happening in the stories and events in their own lives, a critical piece in reading for meaning.
- Students took on the challenge of preparing for the English exam as part of a team. Given the choice between working individually or choosing to read in a group, most students chose to work as a group, knowing they would get greater support and possibly a better grade if they collaborated. Students ended up both helping each other and holding each other accountable for work not done: "You didn't even read this! You are holding us back" several students said with outrage to their slacker fellow students.

What Made the Difference in Literacy Development?

- Time on task: Students read silently every day for 20 minutes, read short stories and novels, wrote and solved word problems, and did homework that involved writing paragraphs and essays. Students also wrote in journals and responded in various ways to what they had read.
- Reading and writing across the curriculum: A focus on reading strategies was integrated into the teaching of science and social science. Topics explored in art (self-exploration and discovery) were reinforced in the literacy and English component of the curriculum.
- Starting where students are: Texts were introduced through interactive discussions and visuals (pictures, video clips, PowerPoints) were used to get students ready to activate background knowledge and to help them link prior learning with new learning. Teachers consistently made connections between students' experiences, the text to be read, previous texts and, in many cases, current events.
- An explicit focus on strategies for reading with understanding (and for expressing ideas in writing): Strategies were designed to help students realize what they knew and didn't know about a topic. Students learned how to check their understanding as they read and use "fix-up" strategies when comprehension broke down. They received help in integrating what was read with other information, and spent a great deal of time question generating and question answering, evaluating ideas, and extending their new understanding to other contexts.
- A focus on being a thoughtful reader and writer: Students were challenged to think and ponder ideas as they read and wrote and were encouraged to

move beyond just getting assignments done and out of the way. Students were pushed to think beyond literal interpretations of narratives (who, what, when, where), and learned to make inferences, using strategies such as exploring motivations and predicting outcomes and consequences of the characters' actions.

- Intensive as well as extensive reading: Students analyzed informational texts (included text books), short stories and novels in detail, creating and using charts such as story grammars, Venn charts, and flow diagrams to help them figure out what was going on. They also studied poems and read them aloud. Additionally, they read for fun, selecting a book of their choice for silent reading (reading logs kept them focused), and were encouraged to take books home to continue recreational reading.

Example: *As part of a poetry unit, students created their own anthology of poems that "spoke to them" and also wrote their own poems to share with others. Anthologies were bound and illustrated by the students and shared in class. As a group, students responded quite positively to modern poetry and songs reflecting feelings they shared, with the work of Tupac Shakur being among their favourites.*

- Different forms of writing: Teachers challenged students to write for a purpose, including writing a code of conduct for the class and a set of policies to combat student-to-student harassment. Students also wrote about the ups and downs in their own lives, as well as opinion essays and analytical pieces. They were gently challenged to go deeper, think harder and provide evidence.
- Computers and writing: Technology was used to aid the writing process. Using computers and publishing software, students created fictitious ads and developed brochures on what to do around Surrey. They also designed a PowerPoint presentation on their own "dream life", including details on the kind of job they would like to have, what kind of family they envisioned, and where they might like to live. As part of that project, students also explored and discussed the schooling or training they would need to reach their goals, using information gained through in the Internet in their presentations.

Discussion

Issues related to research, documentation and assessment (both formal and informal) were at the core of the project from its beginning. The project sought to document a wide range of phenomena around learning and teaching while also documenting student outcomes, particularly around reading, the key skill associated with academic success. The project also captured social and emotional changes that occurred over time as the New School team sought to re-engage

students with the learning process and help them become individuals with a much broader repertoire of knowledge, skills, and strategies at their disposal. The New School sought to help students become more successful not only as human beings but as members of various communities (i.e., school, work, family, neighbourhoods, society).

Social and Emotional Development

The New School was designed to effect changes in the lives of the young people who struggled with literacy. While the design called for a comprehensive program that addressed both the academic and the social and emotional needs of programs, it was clear that there were a great many factors that the project team had little control over, factors that helped influence who students were, how they saw themselves and others, and how engaged in the learning process they could be, given the struggles in their lives and competing demands for their time. (As Jenny Horsman[9] emphasizes, it's difficult to pay attention in class if you are scared.) The project team also had to meet the challenge of working with a high number of students who were angry and hostile. The rest, though less hostile, appeared equally alienated and disengaged from school-based learning. It was important to capture and describe some of these factors so that the project could examine ways to build resiliency and a sense of self-efficacy in the students, skills that would help them to weather the ups and downs of family lives that, for many, included a high quantity of turbulence factors.

It was important for the research to situate literacy learning within the larger social contexts of students' lives since what students bring to school (cognitively, emotionally, and socially) influences what can be learned by whom and how fast[10]. Although working with parents was not an explicit focus of the program, assisting parents, to the extent possible, was an important part of the model. To help document the many turbulence factors that exist in the lives of students, and capture the social well-being of students and their families, project researchers customized an assessment tool, the Family and Community Development Matrix, used by a number of community action groups in the U.S. The revised matrix, renamed "New School Matrix," provides a framework for collecting information that students and families share with the program. The matrix allowed staff and researchers to examine data and discuss it in both descriptive form and in quantitative form. An analysis of the data then made it possible to see to what extent the home lives of the students could be considered "vulnerable" or "in crisis" along a number of dimensions, including health, finances, family relationships, etc., and to what extent families appeared stable. As discussed earlier, a large percentage of the students came from families with a high degree of turbulence factors related to both socio-economic circumstances (i.e., receiving income support or marginally employed) and other factors that correlate with poverty

[9] Horsman, J. *Too Scared To Learn: Women, Violence, and Education.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000.

[10] See also National Academy of Science, *How People Learn* (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1996):

such as domestic violence, unstable living conditions (being evicted, living on the street, unable to make rent on a steady basis), alcohol and drug abuse, and chronic or recurring illnesses.

The school also served students from families that were more stable and were able to support their learning. These families, highly aware of the struggle with learning that their children had experienced, often expressed the frustration they felt when their children failed in school, refused to attend, or got suspended. Their relief at having found a place where their children could succeed and a school that they wanted to attend was palpable. When parents were interviewed at the end of the year, one parent exclaimed, "These teachers are miracle workers!" Another said, "Having my kid in the New School makes me feel I won the lottery." with another parent adding, "Yeah, our kids won the lottery!"

Given the backgrounds of the students, the need to help them develop their social and emotional skills was as important as improving their reading and academic skills. One approach created to address this need was the creation of the "Power Hour," a counsellor-led weekly workshop. Topics included positive communication, team decision-making, anger management, and understanding other people (empathy). The latter included a lecture by Kay Hutchinson, a woman who had used aspects of restorative justice in connecting with the young man who had killed her husband. The workshop tied together many of the ideas the program team had discussed with the students throughout the year, including the value of empathy, community, and harmony.

To capture changes in the students' growth toward emotional maturity, researchers developed scales for Self-Efficacy and Social Responsibility to be used with students in both teaching and assessment. The on-site researcher collected observational notes and then used the rubric to place students on a continuum from negative social behaviour (actively resistant to working with others and sabotaging the efforts of others) to highly mature behaviours, such as "anticipating the needs of others in the classroom and voluntarily extending an empathetic response." A number of the continuing students who had started the New School angry, closed off, uncommunicative, or openly hostile showed high levels of functioning in areas related to a willingness to open up and discuss issues in their lives. As staff worked with students they saw trust emerge slowly but steadily as students began to feel safe enough to talk about their fears and worries. After much work, some students were mature enough to extend an empathic response to others (where previously ridicule had been used).

After a while "the students did start to open up and connect. But boy, at the beginning it was like molar pulling."

-- Marion Malcolmson, Counsellor

Staff realized that for these students to allow themselves to be vulnerable (open) not just in the counsellor's office but in front of other students constituted a tremendous achievement. This was especially impressive for young people who previously had refused to disclose any kind of personal information that would have helped make connection to their peers or assist staff in helping them. Given the many problematic relationships that these students had in their lives (with peers, teachers, and other adults), showing a willingness to make new connections with others and allowing trusting relationships to form was a big step for them — a step necessary if they wanted to engage as learners in a group setting and ultimately to become fully functioning adults.

Especially heartening was the fact that students recognized these changes in themselves and in others and openly talked about their growth. In the final reflections of students, anger and friendship was a strong theme as students said and wrote, "I now know how to deal with my anger." or "I'm not angry all the time anymore." and "I've made friends here." (Most students did not have close friends before coming to the New School.) and "I have much more respect for other students." (from a student who had come to the school alienated and liked to see himself somewhat above it all). As the year progressed, students also started showing significant attachment to the school, a solid buy-in into the New School's approach to teaching and learning, and an appreciation for the model of progressive discipline and restorative action that characterized the school community. Such buy-in manifested itself in students willing participation in meetings with the staff to discuss issues of disruptive or potentially violent behaviour and putting forth their point of view in a calm rational way.

Example: *On several occasions students expressed concerns that they may be asked to leave the school. "Are you going to kick us out?" asked one student before a meeting started around yet another rough housing incident. Staff looked at the two students being disciplined and asked back, "What do you think?" "Naw" said one student, not sounding totally convinced. The staff pushed back: "And why not? Why shouldn't we kick you out when we see you guys act violently against other kids?" A pause, a slight grin, and then the sheepish but honest reply, "Cause you love us?" He was right of course and recognizing that adults could be on his side (even if sometimes on his back) was a big step for him. This student had come to the school sullen, hostile, and depressed and had refused to get up and go to school in his home district. As part of this final reflection he wrote: "I am a much happier person now that I went here (to the New School) and I wish I didn't have to leave." This student had been unsuccessful in his previous school and had left due to feeling acute anxiety in an environment where he was being bullied by his peers.*

Growth in Social and Emotional Development

All adolescents need help and support, instruction, discipline, and caring to help them cope with an ever more complex world and prepare them for the future. They need special help with difficult problems, including those involving peer relationships and various forms of conflict resolution. This is especially true for young people facing multiple risk factors due to family circumstances or those who live in high risk neighbourhoods (itself a risk factor). The New School was structured to provide these sources of support and to offer all its students opportunities for positive development.

One of the aims of the New School was to the increase social and emotional assets of students while decreasing the incidents of thoughtless and antagonistic behaviours. To that end, the school promoted positive social values and served as a place where youth could feel accepted and could explore their personal and social identities without having to confront ridicule or humiliation. Beyond ensuring that all students were safe and appreciated for who they are, the New School also tried to help students develop a strong sense of responsibility toward the school community as well as to the larger world. The school stressed not only the need to show others respect and caring but also emphasized the importance of making a contribution to the well-being of others, inside and outside of the school with a special emphasis on peers, fellow students and family members. Initially, the project team discussed including a community involvement component, but it was felt that the program needed to stay focused largely on in-school work.

Social and emotional development was assessed through interaction with and observation of the students. Social Responsibility was seen as a key domain for this group and staff spent a great amount of time in this area — both in terms of planning workshops and teaching. Although both sets of students were observed, staff decided to concentrate on the incoming students in their observations so that initial assessments would still be fresh in their minds. Staff noted behaviours (both negative and positive) and independently scored these. They used an analytic rubric developed for the project to place students along a continuum from negatively functional (openly hostile or trying to sabotage group processes) to high functioning. Ratings were then triangulated in staff sessions and scores were placed on the scale.

The school was largely successful in helping students make progress toward social responsibility although some students made greater strides than others. Interestingly enough, the greatest progress was made by those students who had been the toughest to reach, the angriest, and the most self-absorbed: 100% of students who had been rated as negatively functioning in Social Responsibility (a full quarter of the class) changed their behaviour to such a degree that staff saw them positively functioning by the end of the first year. Anti-social behaviour, ranging from inconsiderate and disruptive to outright belligerent actions signifi-

cantly decreased and attempts to sabotage the class or a group (through conduct such as non-involvement, off task behaviour or snide comments) became extremely rare. On average, the toughest students, advanced one or two levels on the social responsibility scale. The rest of the students who were rated as functioning relatively positively to start either continued their positive behaviours or changed their behaviour in a positive direction. Staff and students noted that most students increasingly showed trust in staff and peers, showed greater empathy toward others, persevered more when learning became difficult or they were asked to engage with others around topics they found to be uncomfortable. As a group, students also improved in terms of honesty and integrity (such as admitting to being at fault, or, in a few cases, reporting an incident in spite of the danger of being called a "snitch," one of the worst offences in the peer culture). However, incidents of rough housing and name calling (particularly homophobic expressions) continued among several of the students in spite of strong efforts to eradicate these behaviours.

Observations of attitudes and behaviours also showed many positive changes in terms of students' commitment the New School and its approach. In fact, in the end, the greatest change in attitude and behaviour was seen in this category. Given the lack of attachment to schooling and the degree of alienation from the educational process these students had exhibited previously, these changes were highly significant[11].

As a group, more students made progress in the area of personal responsibility than in any other. These changes were followed by progress in "showing trust" toward peers and staff. Showing trust, considered part of emotional intelligence, was initially quite difficult for students and about a third of students had entered the program actively distrustful or not trusting[12]. Again, all of the students who had functioned negatively or did not function in the areas of showing personal responsibility and exhibiting trust improved while the rest either came in fairly responsible and trusting and remained so or showed improvement.

A similar pattern was found in "making constructive contributions to group work." At the start of the program, 32% of students either actively refused to work as part of a group or just sat when team work was assigned. In fact, most did not have the skills required to negotiate ideas, take turns, or come to conclusions that are jointly derived. Toward the end of the year, however, all students were able to work in a group, although they did not demonstrate a very high level of

[11] Many of the students spoke highly of the New School approach to parents, and several recruited other students to the school. In one extended family, three teenagers joined the New School, all with distinctive learning difficulties that had made learning in regular school quite frustrating for them.

[12] "Not Trusting" was defined as not believing that teachers had the kids' best interest in mind, not believing that discipline would be impartial, and *not* sharing personal information with the counsellor or with other peers.

enthusiasm for the group process. Nor did they consistently offer responses that could be considered mature and thoughtful.

Toward the end of the program, after much modeling and explicit instruction on working in teams and workshops in empathy and the need to be sensitive to others, these students had changed to the degree that they were able to take risks in their own learning and extend themselves toward others. They were developing emotional intelligence and moved toward demonstrating some of the skills seen as essential for success in ongoing education, training and work.

Discussion

In examining and describing the progress of continuing students who had completed the entire two-year program, several significant changes stood out among the rest: Staff stressed the enormous gains that students had made in the areas of trust. Trust allowed the students to open up, become vulnerable, and get the help they needed to deal with problems both in terms of reading and academic skills, but also with the challenges that confronted them outside of the classroom.

"Being able to trust that others were there to help them and were not out to embarrass them or hang them you out dry – that really helped students take risks."

-- Kyle Sanford, Teacher Aide

What evidence was observed of students moving ahead in their learning because they started to trust each other and their teachers? Some of the students with the most severe reading difficulties started to read aloud in front of the class, knowing that they would not be ridiculed. Another student offered to give a small speech welcoming incoming students and, although he froze up in the process, the fact that he had volunteered and put himself and his reputation as a tough guy on the line was a breakthrough. Students buying into the restorative action process and being willing to apologize and make amends was another powerful example of change in social and emotional development.

"They can tell early on that we really want to hear what they have to say, that we value their opinions. We may push them a bit to go deeper in their thinking, but we do listen to what they have to say and we don't lecture them when they share sensitive information – so over time the trust develops that we are not out to get them. We do let them know from day one 'we want to be on your side, not on your back' – all that stuff about trust needs to be frontloaded so they hear it and see it and experience it."

-- Mark McCue, Head Teacher

A few individual students developed leadership skills as they worked on their group projects and focused on getting things done in meaningful ways and not just getting tasks out of the way. Most importantly, perhaps, a sweetness factor emerged and students started to blossom in their interactions with others, showing caring and encouragement in light of difficulties that other students had.

Example: *In one case, the group actively encouraged a student who was quite shy and introverted and a bit different to come out of his shell and engage with the rest of the class and did so in very gentle terms. They were quite willing to let him do as much as he was comfortable with without pushing him beyond his limits. There was no belittling or intimidation, no sarcasm – just a gentle prodding that worked as evidence of how far students had come. As the counsellor mentioned, "These students start out very self-absorbed and as navel gazers. They are not quite able to think beyond themselves and consider others – so it's just great to see the changes as they start to pay attention to each other."*

What Made the Difference in Social and Emotional Development?

- Letting students experience that staff can be trusted, that expectations and consequences are clear and fair, and that their opinions are valued.
- Making it clear through words, behaviours and responses that teachers and counsellor are in the program because they like adolescents and they like teaching them and working with them. (This cannot be faked since students can quickly discern insincere behaviour.)
- Increasing opportunities to work as a team, explicitly teaching the team process and initially structuring tasks so that roles are clear, discussing problems as they occur, and seeing initial failures as a chance to rethink the approach and teach some more.

The positive changes in social and emotional development that were achieved are especially important since, without them, most of the students were on a negative trajectory in terms of their social and emotional maturity, attachment to school, and positive peer relationships. As other researchers have found (Giddens, 1990 and Eccles et al, 1998), when school disengagement and alienation increase, they often set in motion problems that culminate in school failure, school drop out, or incarceration, any one of which has serious consequences for the future of young people.

VIOLENCE AND CRIMINAL BEHAVIOURS

"If there's a choice between being the tough guy or the idiot – of course you choose the tough guy"

-- Kyle Stanford, Teacher Aide

"The kids are split into sharks and guppies. When it comes to bullying and violence they've been on the receiving end or the dishing out end – and sometimes both."

-- James Powrie, Researcher

Adolescents in Surrey are surrounded by a culture of violence. Youth gangs are growing, and several incidents of murder have occurred among teenagers. Most of the New School students have experienced violence, both as victims and as perpetrators. In many ways, these students are considered as problems waiting to happen as they engage in activities and interactions that put them at risk of harming others and seriously compromising their own future.

Violence had a strong presence in the lives of the students who came to the New School[13]. Among the continuing students (students who completed the two year program), 78% had been involved in physical violence as perpetrators before they started the New School, compared to 35% who had been perpetrators in the group of students who entered in 2003 and participated in the study for one year. However, the latter group also included three students with reports of weapons possession and use in their records.

Reduction in Violent and Criminal Behaviours

For both groups of students (continuing and incoming) who participated in the New School program violence decreased significantly. The tougher group (continuing students) showed a reduction of 41% in acts of physical violence. As for the incoming group, only one student (out of 20) was involved in violence (as part of a physical altercation with another student), leaving 95% of this group violence-free. In addition, there were no reports of weapons possession outside or inside of school.

[13] Data on violence was gathered for both groups, incoming Year 1 students and continuing Year 2 students. It was based on three sources: day-to-day interactions with the students, entries from students' records where available, and stories about their children shared by parents in interviews and informal drop-in sessions at the school. Data regarding previous experiences with violence was coded and then compared with incidents of violence during participation at the New School. Counselling notes remain confidential.

Peer-to-peer interactions remained a concern. Although there was a significant reduction in physical violence, peer-to-peer intimidation in the form of bullying (as distinct from physical aggression) continued to be an issue. The New School stands not alone in this respect. In schools across North America, bullying among students, defined as the intentional use of verbal acts intended to oppress, humiliate, and hurt, remains an ongoing concern in adolescence. While the school was somewhat successful in changing this behaviour, anxiety over the students' tendency to bully remained, particularly among the continuing students, 89% of whom had had notices in their files that indicated incidents of bullying in their previous schools. The bullying observed at the New School included tough students using verbal and non-verbal intimidation to send signals that made other students uneasy, wary, if not afraid at various times. It was clear that some students were quite adept at using intimidation as a survival skill.

Compared to the continuing students, whose previous school profiles made them appear harder and tougher, there was slightly less bullying going on among the incoming students, at least at the start. 40% had reported incidents of bullying before attending the New School and bullying decreased by about 20% on average.

The staff intervened each time an incident of bullying occurred, and the counsellor used conversations and coaching to make students aware of their behaviour and to encourage gentler ways of being.: Examples of negative behaviours, such as silent intimidation through looks and body language, were demonstrated in workshops and examples of various ways of responding were discussed with the entire group. Reasons why young people bully or submit to bullying were explored with all students at length.

Cyber-bullying

As peer-to-peer interactions via technology increased outside of school, the New School had to deal with a new form of aggression: "cyber-bullying" (bullying by electronic means, primarily through instant messaging). Used primarily by female students, negative peer interactions become a serious cause of concern. In one case, name calling, attempts at social exclusion and intimidation continued into the classroom, as rumours about one of the girls were circulated electronically. This new phenomenon is not only a growing concern to the New School[14], but in schools around the world. In fact, Surrey has seen other attempts to smear young girls via the Internet (pictures of teenage students from other schools were displayed along with offensive and wounding messages). The students were

[14] The following year, the New School addressed these issues early on to raise awareness and increase sensitivity and developed workshops for dealing with the issue in greater depth.

embarrassed when others recognized them from the Web. In one such case the result was an attempted suicide by the young woman who had been harassed[15].

Discussion

Staff tried their best to engage students in discussions around bullying and help them brainstorm ideas on ways of diminishing and eliminating bullying by reporting incidents to people in authority. However, the effort was only partially successful. Most students felt that bullying was a given in their lives and little could be done about it, especially if it occurred away from the school. Students were not convinced that reporting incidents of bullying would make a difference. Staying out of the way of bullies as much as possible was their preferred way of handling the situation. While serious incidents of bullying did decrease, a category of bullying termed "roughhousing" continued among the boys who often saw the behaviour as "just fooling around." It took a period of time for the staff to help students see that such roughhousing often got out of hand and ended up as a form of intimidation that hurt the victim emotionally if not physically. Since becoming a victim of such roughhousing (often in the parking lot next to the school) also made students the subject of amusement and ridicule by other students, it was not taken lightly by staff and in some cases suspension coupled with restorative action needed to be implemented. In response to these incidents, staff implemented a series of processes and structures to protect students and involved students in setting and adhering to boundaries designed to keep everyone safe.

Criminal Justice Issues

Prior to entering the New School, a majority of the students had interactions with the criminal justice system, with incidents split fairly evenly among the two groups, incoming (1 year) and continuing (2 year) students. In both classes, more than 50% had been involved in criminal activities. Overall, 24% of the students had serious interactions with the criminal justice system prior to entering the New School and were either charged or convicted of criminal activity, the majority of which were charges of criminal assault. Reports from parents and students indicated that an additional 30% had been involved in crimes, but where students were not charged or were not caught. Besides being charged with criminal assault, some students were involved in other serious crimes, such as the use of a weapon, possession or dealing of drugs, dangerous peer group interactions, theft, and gang involvement.

The New School was able to significantly decrease interactions with the criminal justice system, a key indicator of success in working with students designated at risk. In fact, during the two-year period of the study, no student was charged with

[15] While it is easy to see students involved in cyber-bullying as "mean," and uncaring, the picture changes as details about their home lives emerged — all experienced multiple turbulence factors at home, including family break-ups and significant neglect.

a criminal activity. Staff indicated that this success was due not to any single factor but the totality of the experience and support offered to students.

The school was remarkably successful in eliminating criminal behaviours among the students. However, success in reducing drug and alcohol abuse was mixed as 3 students from the incoming group continued the drug and alcohol abuse that had started before they entered the New School and only one student who had been an abuser had no report of abuse. However, the school was more successful with the continuing students who remained with the New School a second year: In this group, 0% showed signs of drug or alcohol abuse in Year 2, although 30% had had reports of such behaviour prior to coming to the school, and some drug use had continued in Year 1 of the program.

What Made the Difference in Reducing Violence and Criminal Behaviours?

Staff and researchers were keenly aware that a great many factors contribute to violence, criminal behaviours and drug use in communities and schools. None felt that there was a magic bullet that could turn violent kids who had been involved with crimes into life-long non-offenders. They did see, however, that a comprehensive program, a nurturing atmosphere, positive discipline and a team of committed and caring adults can significantly contribute to helping young people designated at risk move in positive directions. Among the factors identified by all those interviewed, the following stood out:

- An ongoing focus on social and emotional development, including modeling of thoughtful, consistent and fair interactions between staff and students and among staff.
- The explicit teaching of what it means to be a thoughtful person, to show respect and caring, and to work in a group.
- High expectations for both academic work and for ways of being; high expectations coupled with support through counselling, coaching, and a chance to make amends when others were put at risk physically or emotionally.
- Staff who trusted students and encouraged them to be open so that issues could be addressed and support given; the setting of boundaries so that students could allow themselves to be vulnerable.
- The front loading of discussions around the importance of community and progressive discipline so that expectations were transparent and students understood consequences from the start (i.e., no surprises).
- Progressive discipline coupled with restorative action and fair and transparent implementation of the rules.
- Staff committed to working with youth, who went "the extra mile" to show that they cared and wanted students to succeed ("We are on your side and not on

your back." was a motto that students were able to experience and believe in).

- A counsellor willing to talk and work with parents to help them address problems they were facing so that family tensions could be decreased.

Discussion

Research in examining the developmental risk factors of youth violence (Herrenkohl, et al, 1999, Wasserman & Miller, 1998, Farrington, 1998) points to many of the attributes that characterized the students who had been referred to the New School. Risk factors predictive of violence at age 18 include manifestation of early violence (strongly related to later violence), violence in the home, failure to monitor children at home, poor family management, and inconsistent as well as severe and abusive discipline.

Besides family factors, school experiences play a role as well. Low levels of achievement, negative experiences in school, and school failure are related to violence risk, as are interactions with delinquent peers. One of the strongest predictors of violence is involvement with anti-social peers including gang participation. Certain community factors increase the chances that an adolescent may become delinquent as well. Being exposed to crime and drug selling in the neighbourhood and indicators of social disorganization may also increase the risk for later violence, as is access to drugs and lax norms for acceptable social behaviour. Finally, exposure to poverty at both the level of the neighbourhood and the family is likely to co-occur with disintegration and thus further elevates the risk for violence. Not surprisingly, exposure to multiple risk factors increases the probability that youth will engage in violent behaviours. However, this trajectory does not necessarily hold true for any given individual.

Scholars who have examined the research on risk factors recommend preventive intervention programs that are comprehensive and developmentally sensitive. Researchers also suggest that programs examine a broad range of factors and social circumstances when developing programs, rather than identifying a single factor and attempting to mitigate it.

A large majority of the New School students lived in circumstances that reflected these risk factors, and for many the school had become a life line that allowed them to hang on and not succumb to negative peer influences or to select criminal activities as a default way of passing the time (several parents mentioned that they were aware of the dangers that confronted kids who skipped school and hung out at the Sky Train station). To counteract the possible negative influences that move many of the young people living in largely poor areas toward crime, the New School in its design and implementation addressed many of the issues raised in research on at-risk youth. These include the importance of helping young people thrive and develop a range of assets, not just a single set of skills,

and the importance of keeping youth connected to a community while offering supportive relationships with peers and adults. Recommendations derived from research and implemented in the New School also included making resources available so that a high quality, orderly and well-coordinated program could be developed, sustained and evaluated in reasonable ways. The New School stands as an example for what can be achieved if political will, resources, commitment, and expertise are brought together for a clearly focused common goal.

Social Factors Put Students at Risk

Students in the New School faced many challenges outside of class. The difficulties they had with literacy and academic skills were part of the larger challenge of coping with circumstances at home, in peer groups, and in the community. The strength and resilience that many of these students exhibited was remarkable. Nevertheless, many of these students remained vulnerable and emotionally quite fragile, while experiencing ups and downs in their development.

The New School sought to foster resilience and self-efficacy in light of adverse circumstances and the many factors that put individuals, families and communities at risk. In order to document these risk factors (so that appropriate interventions could be applied), an existing matrix, designed to capture social indicators in various domains and place students and their families on a continuum from in crisis to vulnerable, to stable, and finally to thriving, was adapted and utilized.

As students and their parents volunteered information and talked about their lives, comments were collected and input into an electronic database to capture a rich picture of the experiences and circumstances that help students thrive or make it difficult for them to do so. Past school records were examined and information about school experiences was entered as well. The matrix was field-tested during the first year of the program and then expanded for use with all students during the second year. As entries were coded and analyzed, a picture of the challenges that families faced emerged, as well as examples of parents who were able to protect their kids and help them thrive.

Analysis of the data showed how tremendous the challenges that children and families confronted were: None of the families could be considered thriving using the social indicators related to "family relationships." Only two families (13%) were stable; the rest were either in crisis or vulnerable to crisis. Most families faced multiple external risk factors that made it difficult for them to help their children blossom. Family break-ups and turmoil were quite prevalent. As families broke up, issues of neglect were cited several times as parents were overwhelmed and found it difficult to cope. Some mothers appeared emotionally depleted. Family break-ups and subsequent reorganizations involving new and old partners had an effect on children. Prolonged custody battles ensued in some instances and new partners asserted their place in the students' lives with actions that were often unnecessarily controlling and harsh.

Difficult circumstances brought with them incidents of abuse at home, including violence against spouses and children, violence among siblings, verbal aggression, and constant adversarial communication among members of the disintegrating family units. As a result, many of the adolescent children were

either locked into ongoing conflict with other family members or left to their own devices as the burden of circumstances overwhelmed the parents. Several of the New School students were severely neglected at home. Several incidents of sexual abuse were suspected as different students shared information about their family lives. Problems related to drug and alcohol abuse surfaced as families struggled with day-to-day maintenance.

Death took its toll on students and their families as well, with a high rate of deaths both among immediate and extended families reported. Both family break-ups and deaths in the family likely contributed to feelings of alienation and insecurity due to neglect and abandonment that was quite acute in several of the students. (One student was first on the scene after a mother's attempted suicide.) Multiple incidents of rejections of various kinds can leave deep scars on the psyche of these students.

Discussion

The New School put into place structures designed to develop external protective processes designed to mitigate the impact of the social circumstances that shape students lives beyond the school. Documentation of these risk factors helped researchers, counsellors and teaching staff to be more aware of students' lives and gain a profile of the group as a whole so that appropriate interventions could be considered and delivered.

Other research also suggests the strong need to document and take into account the social indicators at play in adolescents' lives. Taken together with previous findings, the New School experience suggests the importance of processes that protect students (and families) and build resilience in light of continued adversity. Since family risk factors, such as poor parental supervision, parental conflict, and parental aggression (including harsh, punitive discipline), are some of the strongest predictors of later convictions for violent offences (often up to age 45), it is tantamount that structures and processes to protect students against further adversarial and stressful circumstances (many of which students experienced in their previous schools) be put into place. Efforts must be made to help these students develop a sense of resiliency and self-efficacy and to focus on positive development (as opposed to punitive action and narrowly defined behaviour modification) to help students living in high risk circumstances to develop positive coping skills, persistence and adaptation to circumstances beyond their control.

Given the students' multiple risk factors and extensive challenges, quick fix methods solely focused on increasing reading levels within existing school structures are unlikely to succeed. A restructuring and reforming of school options (at least for students considered at-risk) may be necessary lest predictions of at-risk behaviour become a self-fulfilling prophesy.

LESSONS LEARNED

As has been stated earlier, the New School program model built on contemporary learning theory and the prior experience of other alternative learning models. Significant changes to the program design evolved over time as the project team grappled with the complexities of students' lives, the need to meet changing school priorities, and their efforts to explore approaches that showed promise. Among the many lessons learned were practical considerations that any school or service program will likely grapple with if they seek to implement a similar program. The following looks at some of these key issues.

Flexible Coordination during Start-up

While start-up may not require a village, it does take a team of competent, caring, resilient professionals who are committed to building a program from the ground up. They must be able to deal with ambiguity and tackle problems as they arise. It takes individuals who have strong problem-solving skills and are flexible enough to deal with issues that have little to do with traditional notions of administration and instruction. At the New School, the challenges included a leaking roof, classrooms still in disarray the weekend before school was to begin, and technology that did not truly work until the second year.

It took time to develop relationships and build an effective collaboration between and among the direct service team, school administrators, and the off-site research and development team. The project was fortunate inasmuch as key staff

knew and respected each other, though a couple of rough spots were encountered between the multiple players when expectations differed, work became overwhelming, and pressures to deliver a program from scratch took their toll on everyone. Ultimately, expectations were managed, timelines negotiated, and trust and respect established.

Lessons Learned

Start-up time in any new project is likely to be chaotic. Murphy's Law prevails. Any team involved in a demonstration project will need time to develop sound working relationships. When crises arise, a skilled administrator is needed to help negotiate differences, make timely decisions, maintain the vision, and keep the project on track. It is essential to have sufficient lead time and to recognize that completing necessary start-up tasks (from hiring staff to preparing the classroom and installing a computer network – to name only a few) depend on others whose availability and schedules may differ from those of the program staff. Two issues may prove to be particularly problematic; one related to hiring staff another to technology. Because of union agreements and bureaucratic processes, it may take a project many months to sort through nominally eligible applicants before finding sufficiently qualified staff, particularly if it is necessary to go outside the pool of teachers in a district. For example, during Year 2, the school could not advertise outside of the school for qualified staff until in-district staff who showed interest but did not have the special qualifications sought by the school had been interviewed. As a result, valuable time was lost, time that could have been used to bring a new teacher on board, train her and have her interact with existing staff before the new school year started.

Ensuring that students in the New School had access to the kind of technology that was an integral part of the model proved problematic as well. The Information Technology (IT) departments of school districts often have rigid policies and constraints regarding what and when they will install computer equipment in the classroom. Generally, these are based on the needs of standard classrooms, which may differ substantially from what is desirable for the New School model. Issues may be as simple as the number of computers to be allocated to the classroom or the size of a network server or available hard drive space on individual computers (the New School emphasized technology-based multimedia projects that consume substantially more storage space than most general education classrooms). There may also be issues related to other computer specifications (i.e. low-end computers often purchased by school districts may not have high speed Firewire ports required for digital video capture). The purchase and installation of specific software can also be time consuming if it's not listed on a standard purchase list negotiated with a vendor. The sooner negotiations begin with the IT department, the more likely it will be that the desired technology will ultimately be installed — and once installed, will be maintained on a timely basis.

One Year is Not Enough

Administratively, the greatest challenge was providing academic credit for Grade 10 for students who were emotionally, socially, or academically unprepared to succeed in Grade 11. Originally, the school district had suggested to parents, students and project staff that if students participated, made an effort, and showed progress in their literacy skills, they would receive academic credit for Grade 10. This turned out not to be true. Moreover, throughout the first year, it proved nearly impossible to get clarity on what kind or level of achievement might justify credit. In the end, a two-fold decision was made:

1. For students who had signed on for a one year program (as initially envisioned and promised to them), a compromise policy was established: no academic credit would be given if their classroom work or behaviour indicated that they would not be successful in either a regular 11th grade classroom or in a Learner Centre that required at least 8th grade reading skills and the ability to work independently. However, students who completed the year were given "modified credit" and received recommendations for the next year.
2. A second year for 10th grade was instituted since one year was insufficient time to build literacy skills, prepare students academically, and help them become socially and emotionally mature enough to succeed in school environments that are relatively unsupported. (In the end, one student with fairly strong skills transferred to a Learning Centre, three students returned to their old schools, several students moved away from the area and the rest returned for a second year.)

Lessons Learned

It became clear early on that students who are struggling readers have substantial gaps in academic knowledge and face multiple challenges in their lives (including high incidents of violence) will need more than a one year program before they will be prepared to transition to a regular academic environment. Discussions with the school district about credit options must be clarified early and should be put in writing. Most importantly, a literacy intervention program for high school students who read below the 7th grade level that must also meet grade-level academic standards should be designed and implemented as a two-year program in order to allow for sufficient time to develop literacy skills, foster social maturity, and build the skills, strategies and knowledge necessary to succeed in subsequent academic classes.

Team Approach to Teaching and Service Planning

The design of the New School called for staffing that included one full-time teacher, a full-time teaching assistant (in the case of the New School, an aboriginal support worker with substantial experience working with low-literate youth), a

full-time counsellor. A full-time on-site researcher was also present for the two-year study to conduct standardized assessments, track student data, document instructional processes, report on meetings, and write progress reports. The outside research and development team designed the model, created the framework for the instructional approach, conducted demonstration lessons, identified pertinent research on literacy and learning, and prepared curriculum materials to be field-tested as part of the research. They also reviewed and collected information, including video documentation, on all aspects of the program to ensure rich data in documenting findings. The school district appointed a principal to administer the school, maintain procedures, guide decisions, and address non-research related problems.

Instructional staff, the counsellor and the on-site researcher met weekly on Fridays to discuss individual students, their progress and challenges. They reflected on what worked and didn't work in terms of curriculum and teaching, and made decisions about issues related to discipline, instruction, grading, and classroom policies. On a monthly basis, the off-site researchers met for a week or more on site, observed classes, discussed issues and participated as members of the team. Decisions and findings were used to modify the design and make necessary changes to improve program operations.

Lessons Learned

Staff stressed repeatedly that one of the key components that made the project work was a team that collaborated effectively and supported the efforts of individual team members. Since the issues confronting the students went well beyond difficulties with reading and writing, a team that brought together multiple perspectives on what was happening with the students and why made a tremendous difference. Being able to work as a team reduced some of the pressures on individual staff members and provided opportunities for thoughtful discussions. As part of these discussions, staff generated solutions that addressed the whole student, not just a single behaviour that required an immediate response. Experience has shown not only that a team approach is essential but that a significant amount of staff time (Friday mornings in the case of the New School) must be set aside specifically devoted to team-based discussions of issues, and to problem-solving.

Thoughtful Policy for Dealing with Discipline

Initially, decisions about responding to student outbursts or lack of attendance were made on a case-by-case basis as events occurred. Over the course of the first year, policies were developed that allowed staff to deal with student disciplinary issues in a more nuanced and consistent manner. At the instigation of the counsellor, incidents that involved violence and threats of violence were re-examined and became part of a larger discussion on how to deal with the many emotional, social, and behavioural challenges that are part of students' lives.

Many of the students had had interactions with the criminal justice system and some had criminal records. Violence was an integral part of their lives. They were quick to respond loudly and aggressively to insults (real and imagined) and what they saw as lack of "respect" from others. Dealing with these issues was clearly needed in order to keep the school safe and protect all students from violence.

The initial program design had called for "zero tolerance" of violence and immediate expulsion from the school, based on similar policies in other schools. As the team discussed behaviours and consequences, the zero tolerance model requiring expulsion from the program was abandoned in favour of a more flexible approach that called for an immediate intervention, using a probation strategy, in cases of violence or threats of violence, but also allowed for reintegration of a student into the school community if certain conditions were met. Facing probation meant being excluded from the instructional program for a probationary time and attending tutoring sessions instead. During that time, students were also required to meet with the counsellor to discuss causes for their anger and explore strategies for managing outbursts and moods. The counsellor, therapeutically trained, invited students to discuss stresses in their lives and encouraged them to explore feelings and patterns in their responses to particular incidents so that they could identify trigger points. Students were also asked to think and talk about their behaviour and the effect that their actions had on those around them. As a final step before reintegration into the classroom community, they were asked to meet with the student they had hurt or threatened. This process borrowed strategies from both "restorative justice" models and approaches associated with "progressive discipline."

Lessons Learned

It was found that neither a policy of zero tolerance with punitive action nor an ad hoc model of responding to students on a case-by-case basis was very effective. Rigid zero tolerance meant that the staff would remove needy students from the program without offering them opportunities to make amends or return to the classroom. The case-by-case method made it too easy to have different sets of standards for young women and young men or to be more lenient with students who were perceived by staff as essentially "good kids" while being tempted to throw the book at those students who were considered to be "trouble-makers." "Fairness" is a powerful concept among youth who often see themselves as victims of an unfair world. It is critically important that school procedures be perceived as being fair and equably applied.

The project team sought to create conditions that would make the New School a safe place for all students while at the same time helping them develop strategies for dealing with anger, considering the consequences of their actions, and changing negative behaviours. The team determined it did not want to be part of a pipeline that moved kids from violence to suspension to drop outs to crime and

incarceration. The team agreed that it was necessary to create a more flexible approach to discipline where unacceptable behaviour was named and discussed, violence was stopped, amends could be made, and students could become reintegrated into the school system.

Understanding Families and Communicating with Parents

The New School is committed to communicating with parents and discussing their children's work and progress. Staff and researchers conducted interviews with parents and guardians, asking them to discuss their children's history of learning. They invited these adults to discuss the difficulties their children were experiencing and to tell them when they first noticed that their children were falling behind in school. These interviews showed that while most parents were not able to identify the specific reading difficulties that their children exhibited, they were keenly aware that their kids were not academically successful and that their lack of success contributed to their getting into trouble. It was telling that quite a few of the parents talked about their own difficulties in school, illustrating the intergenerational aspects of low literacy and/or learning difficulties.

Connecting with parents proved to be a tremendous challenge. Some parents were working (evening appointments were set up), others were absent from the family (guardians were contacted), and still others were simply too overwhelmed with life to respond to project staff. Setting up teacher parent conferences to talk about progress (or lack thereof) took long hours of phone calling, and many appointments needed to be rescheduled (in one case, staff needed to call 10 times to connect with a child's father, who, ultimately, never did come to the school to meet with the teachers and the counsellor).

In both years, staff set up an Open House evening designed to give parents a chance to see the school in action, hear more about the instructional program, and ask questions of teachers and staff. About one-third of the parents attended the first event. Parents who asked questions were quite emotional and strongly supportive of the program. Several expressed tremendous frustration that the kind of support their children received in the New School would not be available once their children transitioned to regular schools. These concerns influenced the decision to offer a second year of preparation. Subsequent parent nights have resulted in greater parent participation with over 80% of parents attending at one meeting, a signification indication of increased parent engagement and trust in staff.

Through interviews, conferences, meeting with individual parents, and talks with the students, staff and researchers gained insights into the day-to-day lives of the families of the students. Through time, the team became more keenly aware of the many challenges the families faced, problems that often made it difficult for the students to concentrate on schoolwork and focus on learning. The challenges that were identified included health and employment issues (job losses were

common), high incidents of violence (with some family members being both victims and perpetrators), housing (several families lost their housing due to insufficient income), and drug and alcohol dependency (one mother came to an interview reeking of marijuana). In a few instances, sexual deviance and abuse were part of the family history and in several cases social service workers were involved with the families on an ongoing basis.

Lessons Learned

Struggling adolescent readers often come from families with complex lives full of turbulence. Dealing with everyday crises makes getting involved in their children's schooling difficult if not impossible for many parents or guardians. Many of the parents had had negative experiences themselves in school and were intimidated by the thought of meeting with their child's teacher. Parents did respond to the New School once they felt comfortable with the process. Trying to connect with all of the parents took a great deal of effort and caused some frustration for the staff, but ultimately proved to be both necessary and worthwhile. It gave the team a much better sense of what the students were up against once they left the classroom, and it helped parents gain some understanding about their children's learning challenges and how they could help. As the program unfolded, many of the parents and guardians took the initiative to call the school to discuss their children or ask for help with personal or family problems. Although fostering communication and, where possible, developing collaboration with parents requires substantial expenditures of staff time, it is vital and staff time should be allocated accordingly.

Documenting Family Environments

New School students lived in a community where pockets of wealth and pockets of poverty co-exist in near proximity. Poorer neighbourhoods are largely situated in North Surrey, the area from which the majority of students were drawn. Given the income statistics of North Surrey, it is not surprising that most families interviewed fell into categories associated with being "in crisis" or "vulnerable" along a number of dimensions (health, employment, income, housing). In cases where families in crisis moved toward a "stable" category, the status was often temporary and changed as new crises emerged, in some cases with alarming frequency.

As part of the field testing, information was collected on the families and notes were made that indicated a family in crisis or vulnerable to crisis. In terms of family relations, indicators that placed a family in the crisis category included existence of child or spousal abuse; neglect or violence; overt, severe parental conflict, including conflict around child rearing practices; abdication of parental responsibility; and non-communication between members of the household. Examples that indicated a family was "vulnerable to crisis" included a threat or history of abuse and neglect, frequent parental conflict, insufficient adherence to

parental responsibilities, and limited or conflictual communication. Indicators related to employment and family finances included issues such as imminent termination of entitlement to income assistance, unemployment with no income or job leads, and inability to meet basic food needs. Indicators were related to Shelter, Health and Safety, Social and Emotional Health, and Child's Education and Development. The latter included indicators related to violence, truancy and absenteeism, detention and at-risk behaviours that resulted in school-based disciplinary actions or interactions with the criminal justice system.

Lessons Learned

The goal had been to field test the Family Development Matrix to see how it could be used to document the changing socio-economic circumstances of students and their families. Originally, it was thought (somewhat naively) that the Family Development Matrix would help document how, through social service referrals and interventions, families might be helped to move from "in crisis" to "stable" or "secure" if not to "thriving." However, for the families of New School students, linear progress along the continuum of the scale did not occur, due in part to the complexity of the problems confronting poor families and due in part to the diminished capacity of the social service system to provide help beyond crisis management. The Matrix did, however, provide a snapshot of the challenges faced by the families of our students and offered a glimpse into their day-to-day lives. The use of the matrix in other educational settings would help the teaching and counselling staff to better understand and respond to the challenges faced by students and their families.

Providing Literacy Services for At-Risk Youth

The project's approach to literacy services was originally designed for out-of-school youth being served in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the community. The decision to offer the program as part of the alternative school options provided by District 36 (Surrey, BC) required rethinking and redesign not only of the model, but of curriculum and instruction as well. Teaching materials which had been designed and selected to foster life skills development and promote transition to work and/or training needed to be rethought and rewritten. The switch to a school district-based program meant focusing a large part of the project team energies on helping students develop academic skills so that they could be successful in 11th grade in regular school or self-paced alternative programs.

Initially, the project significantly underestimated a number of challenges that students presented in the areas of teaching and learning. Although it had expected to work with students who struggled with literacy, the project team was not fully prepared for the wide range of reading skills present in those students. Our initial reading tests during Year 1 revealed that there were two students who could not read at all (their test scores showed 1.4 and 2.0 grade level equiva-

lents) on one end of the literacy continuum and at the other end, several students who read fairly well, with reading levels that hovered around the 8th grade mark, 2 years below grade level. Although able to access texts independently, even the more proficient students had difficulty dealing with academic content, had few effective study skills, and had developed attitudes and behaviours that proved counter-productive to effective learning. These students presented as much of, if not more than, a challenge as the non-readers.

The majority of students fell in the midrange of skills between 4.0 and 7.6 grade-level equivalents. Although they technically were able to read easy fiction and non-fiction, for the most part, they never read much of anything. They clearly fell into the category of "reluctant" and, in some cases, "resistant" readers, adolescents who were a-literate, non-readers by choice rather than by skill. For the most part, literacy was a burden accompanied by frustration, not ever an activity that they would seek out because it brought them joy or opened the world for them.

Reading science texts and dealing with academic work was both challenging and frustrating for all of the students, including those who read at mid-levels of proficiency. The students were well aware of this problem. In a reading inventory conducted at the beginning of the class, 100% of the students identified textbooks as the type of print with which they had most difficulty.

Reviewing the 10th grade texts, the project team recognized why the students had difficulties with academic texts. Textbooks are written in academic language and the cognitive load required to access the information is quite high. Understanding them requires conceptual knowledge, specialized vocabulary, experience with complex language structures (long sentences with frequent subordination), and sophisticated vocabulary.

The academic texts also presumed that students had acquired at least five years of background knowledge that could now be brought to bear when reading a 10th grade texts. Not only did our students not have the requisite skills, they also had a history of school failure that had crushed their desire and inhibited their ability to learn in school. Unable to keep up in class and disengaged from learning, the students had failed to grasp key concepts and facts from their courses over the past three or four years. Moreover, they had developed coping skills that, while potentially useful for self-defence, nevertheless, worked against academic success. Students had learned to lay low, to act out, or tune out, and were intent on never letting on that they didn't understand anything. They clearly felt that asking for help was a sign of weaknesses, likely to invite ridicule or worse from peers and criticism from teachers. Most students had learned early on that it is much better to disengage or be thought of as a troublemaker than to be considered a "dummy" who doesn't know how to read. Given these circumstances, it took

tremendous courage for students to participate in the New School where their difficulties would be apparent and there would be no place to hide.

For most of the students, difficulties with reading intersected with difficulties in learning in general. These difficulties were acerbated by a lack of experience in learning how to learn (none of them had consulted an encyclopaedia and few had ever used the library) and by problems connecting with others socially, including peers. They had little experience and no desire to work with others as part of a group and were new to collaborative learning. Clearly, any program seeking to work with adolescent non-readers will face challenges well beyond merely increasing the literacy skills of these students. Programs designed to re-engage adolescents in school will need to help students develop not only the skills and knowledge needed for academic survival but will also need to address a wide array of social and emotional issues so that these young people will be able to function well in adolescence and beyond.

Lessons Learned

- Using an integrated approach allowed teachers and students to approach topics from multiple perspectives. This approach also made it easier for students to create deeper cognitive connections as topics and skills were reinforced. For example, as part of a unit on personal identity, students took photographs of each other and described what they saw, painted self-portraits, wrote a personal essay, and wrote a short personal biography. They also created a "life map" that showed the ups and downs in their own lives. Following the writing, they worked alone or in pairs to build dioramas in art class depicting a key event in their lives that stuck with them. Back in the literacy class, students wrote about the event (or in the case of the non-writers, dictated the story to the teacher) and then produced a Claymation video version of the story as part of their technology training. As they told their story and brought it to life, they became familiar with concepts such as characters, plots, events, settings, conflict, and resolution, building background knowledge for novel studies and connecting school work with personal experience.

  There were benefits for staff as well. Seeing students' lives depicted through art and listening to students talk about critical incidents in their lives allowed the counsellor and the teachers to gain greater insights into students. Integrating skills through themes allowed more opportunities for success, given students' different talents and skills. In addition, getting positive feedback on their work from different individuals helped students see themselves in a new light and became the basis for moving toward more trusting relationships with the adults in the program.

- Differentiated instruction and time for independent learning allowed staff to respond to students on an individualized basis. Each week time was set

aside to allow students to work individually or in pairs while teaching staff moved from student to student to help with academic work or provide individual tutoring in math, writing and reading. Non-readers got an opportunity to get help with skills related to basic literacy, including word attack, fluency development, and phonemic awareness. Getting one-on-one attention from a teacher, volunteer or the aide made it easier for students to acquire some of the key strategies associated with learning how to learn: identifying what you do and don't understand about a given task or topic, making connections between what has previously been learned and new material, transferring skills to different contexts, and very important for struggling readers, asking for help.

The project team was pleased to see that some of the strategies that were taught had indeed "stuck." When students were asked to highlight in a short reflection what they had learned through the year, several students mentioned, "I learned to ask for help when I needed it." Feeling entitled to ask for help, being able to identify what they know and don't know, and having the confidence to approach an adult or fellow student will serve students well in the future. Having time for independent learning also allowed the more proficient students to work at their own speed and tackle more complex tasks while still being able to access the support they needed when becoming frustrated or overwhelmed.

- Working with peers of similar abilities in groups for part of the day helped students find their voice. A slightly different model of differentiated learning was implemented as part of "novel studies." Students joined different groups and then were asked to read *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (an easier book with lots of action) or *The Cay*[16], a more ambitious novel that deals not only with adventure but also with themes of prejudice, love and survival.

  Working in fairly homogeneous groups allowed students to work at a level where challenges were manageable and success within reach. One of the lowest scoring students was a case in point. By the time novel studies was introduced, in the spring semester in Year 1, J, was able to read a novel written at a fifth grade level (her admiration for Buffy, the Vampire Slayer had propelled her into reading). When she offered an answer to a test question about the *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, the rest of her group initially rejected her point. However, further examination of the text by the group showed that she had indeed been right.

  The teacher used other ways of providing manageable challenges for students as well. The students themselves created questions about the novel for

[16] *The Cay* tells the story of an 11 year-old who, dislocated by war, ends up blind and, after the ship he is on is torpedoed is adrift in a life raft with an old man and a cat.

others to answer. This strategy had a two-fold advantage: the task required engagement with the novel and its meaning, and students could write at their individual levels or proficiency. The assessment strategy used in the novel study yielded benefits as well: students could prepare for the written test either individually or as part of a group. They also had the option of taking the test as a group. In the end, students who chose to prepare and test as a group scored higher than those who studied individually. While it is not clear if a self-selection process was at work, it nevertheless provided a powerful lesson to the students, one they mentioned in their year-end reflections as well. Small group work as part of novel studies allowed students to try out their more literate selves in the company of peers with similar skills.

- Using pictures, graphs, and PowerPoint presentations to introduce ideas, build background knowledge, and make subject matter come alive made it possible for students to grasp key concepts. Since none of the students were at a level where standard textbooks made sense to them, the project team wrote and field tested a custom New School science curriculum. Methods were adopted shown to make difficult text more accessible[17], including focusing on a few key ideas (consistent with provincial standards) rather that miring students in too many details, the use of coloured pictures to get information across and help in visualizing concepts, lots of white space, and larger margins to make texts both more readable and more attractive to students. The project team wanted to make the pages inviting enough for students to see that they could tackle the information presented without feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. For the most part this was successful. Presented with the new materials, students found the science curriculum accessible and several reported that "for the first time, I got science." In fact, observations of curriculum-based tests showed that two-thirds of the students had successfully passed a curriculum-based science test calling for structured responses (fill-ins), multiple-choice, and the matching of concepts with definitions, a fairly standard procedure for high schools. Project team members were especially pleased with the responses from female students. Several who had never been interested in science before engaged the process and passed the test. They were justifiably proud.
- Instituting a reading approach that integrates aspects of "intensive" reading with "extensive" reading helped the students become readers. After getting students comfortable with texts through supported reading of short stories and short academic texts, a program of "sustained silent reading (SSR)" was instituted, asking students to select a book that looked promising from a li-

[17] Due to time constraints and pressures to prepare students for Grade 11 science, the project was not able to offer a hands-on curriculum that would give students experience "doing science." It did, however, integrate some experiments into the teaching units.

brary in the classroom. Teachers began to experiment with "reading logs" that asked students to list what they were reading and write a brief structured response to the text. One student, who had tested at the fifth grade level, wrote in response to what he liked about the book he read: "I liked it because it had some action in it and a dog attack." Another student wrote of the same book, "That was the first book I finished and understood[18]."

Some students were able to make the connections between the books they were reading and their own lives. In response to the book *Hate You* one 16-year old young woman explained, "She (the narrator) writes songs and somehow some of the words are related to me just like my relationship with my dad."

Success of the reading approach that encouraged the students to read both widely and deeply (through the use of comprehension strategies) is reflected in one student's response to the book *Dawn* by D.C. Andrews.

"I love D.C. Andrews books because they are great to read. They aren't too hard and give a sense of imagination. You read the book and you can see in your mind's eye what is happening." In response to "Silent to the Bone," one student gave this reason for liking the book: "It was very mysterious and it had a lot of foreshadowing."

These strategies: "visualizing a text," predicting and hypothesis-testing in reading, and examining a text for clues for what is to come had been discussed in class and clearly stuck with these particular students.

- Community building activities and explicit instruction in how to work in groups made teamwork possible. Project members felt strongly about having teamwork as a key component in the curriculum. The ability to work effectively with others and make decisions as part of a group would serve the students well in their academic careers, in training, at work, and in life in general.

  Students had little experience working as part of a group. Initially, when asked to discuss a topic or complete a task, they were in turn disengaged and off-topic. Explaining the goal of an activity and discussing the roles that individuals play as part of a team allowed students to move toward greater success. Workshops on teamwork helped them to experience the roles of facilitators, recorders or reporters and they became more successful team members as the year progressed. The community building activities, such as

[18] Favourites among the students included, *Resident Evil*, *The Outsiders* (one student liked it because it was "not boring to read"), and *Holes*. One student wrote about *Holes*, "I liked it because I read it maybe 20 times."

the Tuesday Round (an uninterrupted personal sharing of thoughts about a topic), encouraged students to be more vulnerable and reveal something about themselves, which then made it easier to take a risk and express an opinion as part of group work.

- Literacy projects that used technology proved exciting to students. In the beginning, collaborative projects, such as creating a brochure about a community service agency proved to be quite challenging for students. In many instances, one student would take the initiative while others either rode on his or her coattails or grudgingly did staff work such as copying. It was realized that for inexperienced students early projects would need to be much more structured and tasks and roles needed to be spelled out clearly. As a result, later projects were more successful. One such project asked students to use books and the Internet to find information about a social studies topic and then create a PowerPoint presentation to show the class. Students readily embraced PowerPoint as their technology tool. Using PowerPoint, they combined print, pictures, animation and sound — feeling competent and confident in their ability in their use of PowerPoint — to get their message across.

Scenarios gave staff a sense of how students thought and allowed them to target key areas for social and emotional development. Most of the students had little experience making informed decisions or being thoughtful in responding to others. To build these skills, students were asked to respond to a series of scenarios dealing with themes common in the lives of adolescents (threats of suicides by friends, eating disorders, bullying). After thinking about the scenarios individually, they discussed them in small groups and then generated a possible course of action that the person in the scenario might follow. They then were asked to talk about the advantages and disadvantages of each option. The ideas the students generated offered worthwhile insights into their thinking. For example, they felt that reporting a bully might be a good idea on paper but would do nothing to protect the victim beyond the confines of the school. Based on initial student input, it was evident that most of the students showed a severe lack of empathy for the adolescents depicted in the scenarios. In response, the counsellor developed a workshop on "empathy" and used a CBC-produced video that really held the students attention. She explained the need for empathy, led a discussion and modeled various responses. In addition, a number of activities were developed to build background knowledge and help create insights into violence at schools, centring the topic on bullying. Students explored Websites, took notes, answered questions, and then compared them with others in the class. By the end of the year, students demonstrated that they had developed some of the team skills they had been taught and now were able to work much better in groups.